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Few thanatological studies focus on the impact of the death of a parent on college students between the ages of 17 and 23; a knowledge limitation that may be doing more harm than good through ignorance, avoidance, and inflexible policies. This phenomenological study used narrative inquiry to explore how students from a variety of backgrounds process parental death and how institutions of higher education can best support them. The primary research question of this qualitative study was "What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are enrolled in college?" Sub-questions were "What resources do these parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their college experience after the loss?" and "How do colleges and universities respond to the needs of parentally bereaved college students?"

The Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) was the framework that guided the study. Using purposive sampling, participants were recruited by referral from student affairs professionals and an online grief support community. In order to qualify for the study, the participants needed to be current students or recent graduates who experienced the death of a parent in the last three years (since January 2020) while they were enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year institution. Completion of a degree program was not a prerequisite, as some individuals may have postponed or ended their enrollment as a result of their parent's death. Ten participants completed two interviews (that averaged over an hour) via Zoom to discuss the nature of their parent's death, share demographic information, and address topics related to the research questions.

The findings were organized into themes: (a) the immediate impact of the death of their parent; (b) resources and support students found helpful; and (c) what resources students wished

they had access to. Findings aligned with the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and other death research on the general college student population (Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al. 2016; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). The study took the interplay of participants' self-described salient identities into account and was also contextualized within the global Covid-19 pandemic which caused compounding crises for the participants.

This study advocates for expanded institutional services to support parentally bereaved students. The implications for higher education practitioners include campus-wide trainings on grief and appropriate resource referrals; a highly visible website with policies, procedures, and resources; and opportunities for students to connect with other bereaved peers through group therapy or a recognized student organization. Implementation of these improvements can help campus communities better understand and support their students as they navigate one of the toughest experiences they will encounter.

Keywords: college students, parental bereavement, parent, death, grief, bereavement, student affairs, parents

"I'M REALLY SORRY YOU JOINED US, BUT WELCOME TO THE CLUB": THE IMPACT

OF PARENTAL DEATH ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Approved by

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Dr. Brad Johnson
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DEDICATION

In memory of Major Wojciechowski, Biggi Brookes, and the parents who said goodbye too soon.

APPROVAL PAGE

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As the old saying goes, "Write what you know." Sometimes I wish I did not know so much, but alas, here's a dissertation. Growing up in a funeral home imparts a certain familiarity with mortality and often a morbid sense of humor. I am grateful for the family business that taught me not only the mechanics of embalming and how to parallel park a hearse, but also the importance of each day and ways to help bereaved family members navigate a loss. Thank you to the fine funeral directors I looked up to: Ed and Major Wojciechowski, Matt and Lori Gracan, Bob Knight, and Pat Lanigan.

I am incredibly fortunate to have been taught by some of the best teachers, two of whom have had a lasting impact on my life and inspired me to pursue this Ph.D. Dr. Janice Skraly never wanted her students to limit their potential. I called Doc in the second year of my program and expressed doubts about finishing. She said, "You can do this. If you don't, call me, and I'll kick your ass." Well, Doc, I did it! Dr. John McGrail took a gentler approach, but still pushed as hard. Doc was the first person to call me after my dad died. I am grateful for his wisdom and support. I listened to classical music as I wrote every chapter thanks to him. GATE room habits die hard.

I cannot write a dissertation about bereaved college students and not mention how I am forever indebted to Lehigh University. When I informed Lehigh that my father died, they replaced almost all my loans with grants, essentially erasing any financial burden. Thank you especially to my admissions counselor Dana Stow, the Financial Aid Office staff, and Bruce Charles in the Bursar's Office. The Lehigh community filled in for my family as I grieved five hours away from home. Carolina Hernandez welcomed me with open arms and I became fast friends with Ashley Pritchard and Kelsi Radzikinas. I was fortunate to have an understanding roommate with incredibly supportive parents who adopted me for Family Weekend—Kyle,

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. – Matthew 5:4

Although most people usually avoid the awkward topic of death (Straker, 2013; Willer et al., 2020), this final life stage is universal. Researchers estimate that 35–44% of college students are within 24 months of a general grief process mourning the loss of a friend, grandparent, or pet (Balk et al., 2010; Cousins et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2015). Continued examination of grief and bereavement is important because of the likelihood of its occurrence and the negative impacts of this experience. Research focused on parentally bereaved college students is limited. As a result, few higher education institutions are prepared to respond to bereaved students, especially ones who have lost a parent (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019).

Background of the Problem: The Ubiquity of Loss

The death of a loved one can significantly impact students physically (Hardison et al., 2005; Stroebe et al., 2007), interpersonally (Balk, 2008), cognitively (Boelen et al., 2006), academically (Cupit et al., 2016), and emotionally (Howarth, 2011). These large tolls also impact students' ability to persist, thus impacting retention and graduation rates (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

The qualitative and quantitative evaluations of grief and loss provide context to understanding the impact of loss on college students. Cousins (2008) explored the impact of bereavement on social and emotional adjustment to college as well as examined the role of alcohol in coping with loss. Cupit et al. (2016) detailed academic challenges experienced following a loss, which included changes in study habits, lower test scores, need for additional time to complete work, inability to concentrate in class, and decreased class participation. These

distractions are problematic for college students, considering the necessity of concentration and easier access to alcohol or other substances that may further inhibit academic progress.

Due to the nature and intensity of grief, sometimes the matter goes unaddressed. Balk (2008) found that many students do not believe that they need help, indirectly prolonging the negative effects of grief. Some situations may be too traumatic to revisit so individuals avoid those instances completely. Experiential avoidance, the conscious unwillingness to repeat certain events, can be used as a positive coping strategy if individuals revisit the situation eventually (Shear, 2010). The avoidance is considered maladaptive if those scenarios are never addressed. Prolonged, unaddressed bereavement could result in complicated grief (Boelen et al., 2006) where these issues become chronic.

Grief is a process that is rarely linear and finite, but rather a circuitous path that can be navigated. Plocha and Bacigalupe (2020) explored resilience in young adults who were "doing OK" following the death of a parent. Based on their interviews, they identified markers of "doing OK" as the following: a partial return to their "old selves," reconnecting or reengaging with life (following withdrawal), facing reminders of their deceased parent with comparatively less sadness, and staying in school. Whereas grief looks different for every individual, these indicators add nuance to broadly defined stages of grief and challenge the notion that grief is something from which you simply "move on."

Whereas death is a universal phenomenon, the human response is highly individualized. Those experiencing loss may find the time confusing and further complicated by the fact that the topic is often avoided in Western culture (Kessler, 2019; Straker, 2013; TEDx Talks, 2020). Many find the topic uncomfortable or awkward, which is why it should be explored, normalized, and better understood (Schuurman & Mitchell, 2020; Willer et al., 2020). A qualitative study

lends itself to capturing the experience of the bereaved individual in the form of their narrative. Quantitative studies are helpful, however, the use of a Likert scale or limited multiple choice responses does not encapsulate the full spectrum of experiences related to bereavement.

Even with the added nuance made possible by a qualitative study, most studies have looked at generalized responses to death without focusing on a specific demographic identity, much like Varga et al. (2022) did with Black college women. Additionally, most studies include participants who are grieving a loss without parsing out a specific relationship (e.g., sibling, friend, grandparent). Drilling down farther into specific populations can provide additional information since Rubin et al. (2011) found that the nature of the relationship impacts the bereavement process and the intensity of grief is proportional to the love for the deceased individual (Klass et al., 1996). There is research on the impact of parental death on young children (Elsner et al., 2022), but the exploration of the impact of parental death on a college student can still be further explored.

Statement of the Problem

Despite being universal phenomena, death, grief, and the bereavement that follows carries a wide range of responses and can be devastating. Few studies in the field of thanatology (i.e., the multidimensional study of death, dying, and bereavement) focus on college students between the ages of 17 and 23 as the target population. Extant research that centers on college students includes participants who are usually mourning the loss of a friend, pet, or grandparent (Balk et al., 2010; Cousins et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2015). However, little research (Edwards, 2005; Erickson, 1991; Lawrence et al., 2006; Murrell et al., 2018; Plocha & Bacigalupe, 2020; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015; Silverman, 1987) examines the impact of the death of a parent on college students. This dearth of research limits student affairs professionals'

knowledge of this often-avoided experience. These limitations in knowledge of this issue may be doing more harm than good through ignorance, avoidance, and inflexible policies.

College environments are uniquely organized to provide support to students at the time of a death loss, yet sometimes, despite the ethic of care and the networks of support, institutions fail students miserably. Student development research indicates that undergraduate experiences are incredibly influential in the growth and maturation of students as they navigate settings that balance challenge and support (Sanford, 1962). The death of a parent is a prime example of a major challenge that, without proper support, could sideline a college career. A death loss, with time and the proper support, can also be an opportunity for growth.

Purpose of the Study

Goals of this qualitative study were to expand understanding of the impact of the death of a parent on college students and identify patterns and support opportunities for student affairs practitioners and other helpers by building on a conceptual framework that incorporates theories related to grief and loss with a student development lens. This study aimed to explore how students from a variety of backgrounds process parental death and how institutions of higher education can best support them during and through that process.

Research Questions

Considering the context of the individualized experience and the institutional response, the following research questions framed this qualitative study.

1) *What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are enrolled in college?*

    a) What resources do these parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their college experience after the loss?

b) How do colleges and universities respond to the needs of parentally bereaved college students?

Significance of Study

Grief and bereavement literature has demonstrated the impact of a death loss on college students (Cupit et al., 2021; Glickman, 2021). In a recent meta-analysis, Hay et al. (2022) identified 30 peer-reviewed studies of bereaved students in higher education, but none explicitly studied parentally bereaved students. Without this focus, the impact can only be assumed to be an extrapolation of generally bereaved college students. The death may be so disruptive that students take extended leave or withdraw completely, which negatively compounds their individual experience and also carries institutional consequences in terms of student success and retention, along with fiscal implications.

Student affairs practitioners are the key audience for this study and can use these findings to inform their practice as they support bereaved students or process their own personal grief related to a death loss. More specifically, professionals in residence life, counseling services, and case management functional areas are most closely related to this topic since they are the front-line staff most often receiving (or delivering) the news about the student's loss. Ultimately, the findings will be used to establish or strengthen policies and procedures related to student bereavement, thereby lessening the stigma around this topic and clearing the way for support systems to best assist students grieving the loss of a parent.

The Covid-19 pandemic also amplified the significance of this study. Of the millions of unexpected deaths worldwide, ElTohamy et al. (2022) reported that one in every six U.S. college students lost a loved one. In addition to making death more proximal, the global shutdown and subsequent limitations caused the world to lose out on experiences and connections. Whether or

not an individual knew someone who died, there is a high likelihood that they were grieving some sort of loss as a result of the novel coronavirus.

Definition of Terms

This study employs seemingly general terms but to clarify their nuance they are further defined below.

- *<u>Bereavement</u>*: the state of having experienced a loss (Zisook & Shear, 2009)
- *<u>College student</u>***:** individuals between the ages of 17 and 23 enrolled in undergraduate courses of study at a four-year college or university. These parameters permitted the researcher to examine the impacts on students at the age when they are transitioning from a dependent state to independence. Based on the literature (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Martinez, 2018), four4-year institutions are more likely to offer comprehensive services to students.
- *<u>Death loss:</u>* the loss associated with the death of a loved one, in the case of this study, a parent (Servaty-Seib et al., 2010).
- *<u>Grief:</u>* "the reaction to loss - whatever that reaction happens to be" (Murray, 2015, p. 8) in multiple dimensions (physical, sociological, and spiritual; Sanders, 1999); most often passive and involuntary.
- *<u>Loss</u>*: a reduction in resources, whether tangible or intangible, in which a person has a significant emotional investment (Harvey, 1996).
- *<u>Mourning:</u>* "the expressions of one's grief" (Balk, 2011, p. 3) that is active and voluntary and focused on coping and attempting to process grief.
- *<u>Parent:</u>* for the purposes of this study, a parent is not solely defined in a biological sense, but rather by the student's selection of a parental figure who plays a pivotal

role in a college student's experience both emotionally and financially. Family structures have moved beyond a heteronormative nuclear family and limiting this study to two-parent households would be exclusionary. This broader definition may also include "fictive kin" (Stack, 1975; Taylor et al., 2021), which is to say family chosen by the student.

- ***Parentally bereaved***: describing someone who has experienced the death loss of a parent.

Conceptual Framework

Picture a college student's developmental path as an introductory-level rollercoaster at an amusement park. There are ups and downs, banks, and the occasional dip. These straight-forward experiences may take the form of challenging coursework, less-than-expected academic performance, homesickness, securing a highly desirable internship, mastering a skill, discovering a passion, or falling in love. These are all seemingly run-of-the-mill experiences. Now imagine an unexpected double dip or a loop-the-loop on this seemingly easy coaster. These surprise elements represent the death of a loved one during college. In addition to the climbs and dives, these new features add complications for the rider, especially if they were unexpected and were only prepared for a simple coaster. There are plenty of folks who do not like rollercoasters in the first place, and would certainly shy away from the high-flyers and the corkscrews. College can be challenging in its own right, and navigating the death loss of a parent complicates matters further. It was the goal of this study to better understand the complicated twists and turns experienced by parentally bereaved college students.

The aims of this study included individual and institutional considerations of parentally bereaved college students. Both the individuals and institutions are informed by theories related

to grief and student development. These two domains are typically considered separately but do share some overlap. The following section provides a brief review and includes a visualization of the conceptual framework.

Figure 1 incorporates the influences of theoretical perspectives from grief/loss and student development lenses. These influences are depicted as separate but connected since they share similar tenets, but are seldom mentioned together. The light dotted circle indicates their connectedness. The arrows represent the use of these lenses as bereaved individuals process their loss. The sphere of the individual is also oscillating between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented frames (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The microcosm is situated within the institutional circle as the institutional response guides the individual's navigation. The entire system is situated within the societal context, as cultural norms will steer both the student's and school's response and reaction.

Figure 1. Bereaved College Student Conceptual Framework
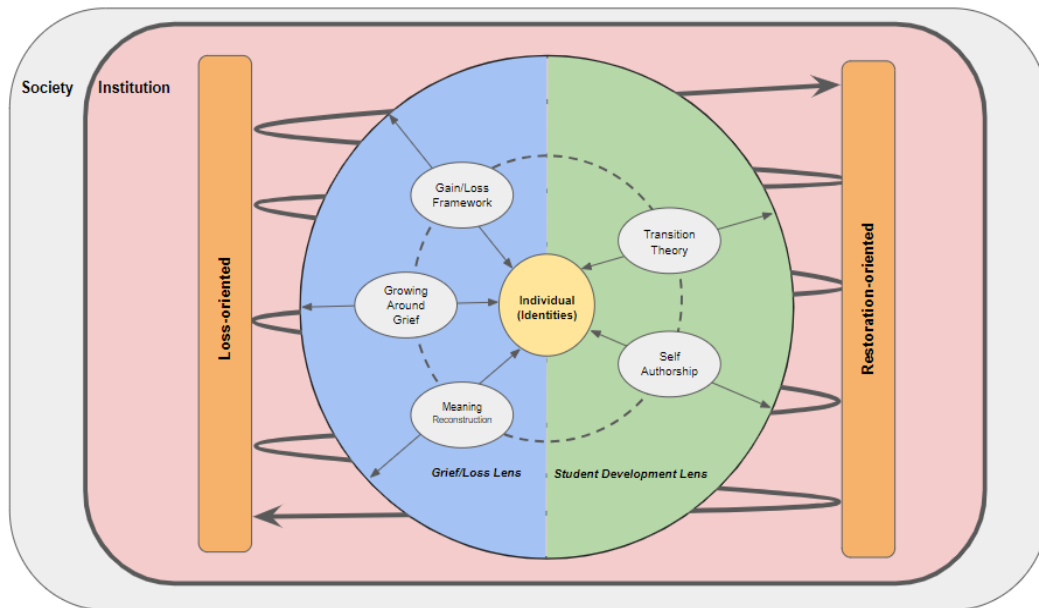
Grief/Loss Lens

In addition to literature concerning bereaved college students, there are grief-related frameworks that undergird this project. Kübler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief (i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) was, at one time, the predominant theory, but is now considered "a reductive and insufficient model for grieving" (Edelman, 2020, p. 21) because grief is not a linear process. In lieu of that static model, two other models are considered. The first is a gain/loss framework to assess the multidimensional impact of life events through consideration of "the perception of both gains and losses" (Servaty-Seib, 2014, p. 332). The second is Tonkin's (1996) "Growing Around Grief" concept where the author argued that grief never goes away, but growth occurs in time and adds richness and depth of experience for the bereaved individual. Both models center on the importance of personal life experiences that can be further captured in a narrative inquiry.

Grief does not heal in a vacuum where it is not actively engaged. Kessler (2019) used the metaphor and described grief as sinking in a swimming pool and eventually hitting the bottom where you decide to stay there or push off and swim through your experience to eventually resurface. This engagement can follow different modalities as bereaved individuals navigate grief. The processes involved can pattern themselves in two well-researched ways: through meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2001, 2004) and the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

In the midst of navigating these dual roles, students are often seeking ways to reconstruct meaning from a life-shattering experience that has disrupted their previous worldview. Meaning reconstruction is (re)piecing together a bereaved person's narrative following the disruption caused by loss. Niemeyer (2004) shared that the result is a self-narrative, which is defined as

9

an overarching cognitive-affective-behavioral structure that organizes the 'micro-narratives' of everyday life into a 'macro-narrative' that consolidates our self-understanding, establishes our characteristic range of emotions and goals, and guides our performance on the state of the social world. (pp. 53–54).

Neimeyer's work is also closely related to Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) research on post-traumatic growth and its benefits of appreciation of life, relationships with others, new possibilities, personal strength, and spiritual change. Specifically related to death loss, Andriessen et al. (2018) found that many participants experienced a positive change to their confidence, self-reliance, and resilience in the time after the death of a loved one.

The Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) argued that a bereaved individual's focus alternates between loss-orientation (i.e., grief and death-related matters) and restoration-orientation (i.e., daily tasks and responsibilities). This model captures the duality of college students as students *and* mourners. Student affairs practitioners will most likely encounter students navigating their grief while also experiencing the various dimensions and experiences of college. Establishing order may help ground the student as everything surrounding them is in a state of upheaval. Managing multiple priorities is a challenge for undergraduate students between the ages of 17 and 23. Academic rigor may create stressful situations apart from navigating grief. Institutions of higher education and their staff play a vital role in supporting an individual working through this challenging life event. These loss and restoration frames of the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) are prominent features in the conceptual framework as the oscillation between those two stressor types mirror what college students are navigating during their everyday life.

Student Development Lens

        This study focused primarily on student experiences. Student development theory demonstrates that college students experience marked growth in numerous dimensions (e.g., cognitively, morally, and socially; Abes et al., 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2004; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Dalton & Crosby, 2010; Mayhew et al., 2010; Perry, 1970) during their time as students. Students sometimes struggle to adjust to new academic settings in addition to the push and pull of interpersonal development that occurs as a result of new challenges in novel settings (Evans et al., 2010; Reynolds, 2008). This environment can be challenging enough even before a student experiences the death of a loved one.

        Navigating grief can also be contextualized through a lens of student development. Whereas they are not explicitly focused on grief, connections to two theories can be drawn: Self-Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009) and Transitions Theory (Anderson et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Both of these concepts pivot on life experiences that determine trajectories for individuals, which typically occur during a young adult's time in college.

        Baxter Magolda (2009) used a longitudinal study to explore the shift of meaning-making from perspectives defined by external agents like parents and teachers to self-authored worldviews determined by the person experiencing the development. Moments of self-authorship emerged at crucial moments called crossroads where the external and internal worldviews intersected with each other causing dissonance. The dissonance, a clash between the different perspectives, provided an opportunity for the individual to challenge previously held beliefs and define their own worldview informed by their own, first-hand experiences.

        Similar to Baxter Magolda, Schlossberg's (2008, 2011) research focused on transitional events where change is encountered. The 4-S system contextualized the transition as it provides

the contexts of situation, self, supports, and strategies. Situation is the context of the event's nature and circumstances. Self and supports are related to the intrinsic (e.g., sense of self, persistence) and extrinsic (e.g., loved ones, communities) resources available. Strategies are the action-oriented steps an individual may pursue as they navigate change.

These two theories are included in the conceptual framework for this study because the death of a parent presents a transitional moment where many variables change. This disruptive transition can often trigger a crossroads moment (Bettencourt, 2020) where the bereaved student is presented with an opportunity to author their own worldview as they make meaning of the loss.

Context of the Institutional Level

This study focused specifically on bereaved individuals when they were enrolled undergraduate college students. The institutional ring encapsulates the various lenses as these experiences often occur within an institutional (college or university) environment. A common theme in the above-mentioned literature is the importance of timely intervention and support. Balk (2001) outlined the structure of a university bereavement center that would offer peer support and structured interventions, raise campus consciousness, and conduct research. Battle et al. (2013) explored the benefits of a peer support group for bereaved college students. Outside the literature, one example of a campus support group in line with these recommendations is Actively Moving Forward (AMF) (HealGrief, 2018), which has a number of campus chapters across the United States and offers grieving students an opportunity to connect with peers who share similar experiences. Servaty-Seib and Liew (2019) argued for the development of institutional bereavement policies and suggested structural outlines for colleges and universities

as they write and enact these policies. Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) also articulated the importance of intervention and support from college personnel.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The participants were individuals at a four-year college or university who experienced the death of a parent during their enrollment in the last three and a half years. In an attempt to limit the scope of the research to the undergraduate experience, the death must have occurred since the Spring 2020 semester (last 3 years) and the student had to be enrolled at the time of the death. One aim of the study was to include diverse experiences in the narrative, especially given that the main body of research is fairly monocultural since it comes from a mostly White perspective and usually minimizes voices of color (H. Servaty-Seib, personal communication, December 17, 2020). To help widen the representation of identities in the study, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to include perspectives from various racial identities, gender expressions, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic levels. As this study aspired to deepen perspectives in death research, priority was given to individuals with underrepresented identities (i.e., students of color, LGBTQIA+, first-generation, or low-income). These differences reflected the general college student population and also demonstrated that individuals' relationships with their parents are reflective of their social identities.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were pervasive and present in all interviews in some form. The participants' location on their grief journey and their experience with self-reflection informed the depth of their responses and even their willingness to participate fully. I was mindful of the art of asking the right questions that yielded fruitful responses; ones that were not too specific nor too broad.

The study assumed participants existed in the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) that positioned them between dealing with the death itself while also managing other duties, particularly student-related tasks. Questions were designed to determine whether participants felt caught in between those processes. For example, a question was asked specifically about the adequacy of the resources provided by the participants' institutions to determine what support mechanisms were helpful or where additional resources were needed.

Researcher Positionality

I recognize my positionality and proximity to this work. In addition to coming from the funeral business (both my father and grandfather were funeral directors), my dad died after a prolonged illness the summer before my first year of college. Not only was I facing the normal transitional challenges at the outset of college, I was also mourning the loss of a parent as I moved five hours away from my family. I am drawn to students who find themselves in similar situations and this perspective influences my professional trajectory. I have served as a member of institutional CARE teams (i.e., early intervention response programs) and met with students early in the grieving process. During these conversations, I do not always disclose my personal experience in the first meeting, but rather share it at an appropriate time to establish credibility and build rapport. This strategy aligns with Rowling's (1999) recommendations of balancing the personas of the "counselor I" and "researcher I," while being "along with" the interviewee, and not just as an observer. My personal experiences certainly influenced my perspective on the study participants' narratives, but I made a conscious effort not to project my own experience (and subsequent growth) onto the participants and their stories.

My visible identities interplayed with participants' identities. I was considerate of ways I built rapport and trust with the interviewees as the topic is deeply personal and often emotionally

charged. I took a socialized lens into consideration since I knew that trust is not inherent, but must be cultivated (Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019). I articulated my role as a listener and stranger, not as a counselor, and was sure to clarify that while this experience may be therapeutic, it does not replace therapy. I also disclosed my own experience with a parental death loss, as that shared experience could impart credibility (Varga, 2021).

Organization of Chapters

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter I presented the issues related to the death of a parent of a college student and details the elements of the study that aimed to capture the experiences of parentally bereaved students. One goal included widening the scope of a predominately White narrative to include underrepresented voices (H. Servaty-Seib, personal communication, December 17, 2020). Chapter II reviews the literature from the fields of thanatology and student development and draws connections between the two disciplines. The areas of overlap include challenge and support, meaning making, and growth and development. Chapter III outlines the methods used for the qualitative study that aimed to diversify the voices of students navigating college in the wake of a parent's death. Chapter IV presents the findings from the study. Chapter V identifies the implications for student affairs professionals while also considering the limitations of the study and ways this research can be expanded in the future.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Losing a parent is something like driving through a plate-glass window. You didn't know

it was there until it shattered, and then for years to come you're picking up the pieces —

down to the last glassy splinter. – Saul Bellow

Because death is a universal experience for human beings (Doka, 2017), one can imagine

that the body of research on the topic is quite vast. A general database search using only "death,"

"dying," "grief," "loss," or "bereavement" would likely yield thousands of results. Due to the

broad nature of the topic, specific limiting terms were added including "young adults," "college,"

and "college students." Initial results then spurred refined searches for seminal articles, critiques,

or more research in a specific area. The specificity also included the types of databases searched.

Fewer modifiers were used for PsycNET and ERIC searches, whereas Google Scholar searches

included more specific terms. The roadmap for this literature review starts with a short overview

of broader topics like general grief literature and then focuses on the smaller body of literature

related to the impact of death on college students, highlighting the dearth of research on

parentally bereaved college students. Student development research that relates to the

bereavement process is also included to situate the developmental trajectory of the students and

their bereavement.

Grief

Grief is the involuntary set of reactions (emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social,

physiological, and spiritual) that survivors experience after the death of a loved one and has

evolutionary, ethological, and psychological components (Archer, 1999). Grief looks different

for everyone, as it is a highly individualized experience influenced by the nature of the death

(Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al. 2016; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008), context of the situation

16

(Bonanno & Mancini, 2008; Cummings, 2015), and the resilience skills of the individual

(Mancini & Bonanno, 2009; Murrell et al., 2018). This section explores various types of grief,

frameworks for understanding loss, approaches to engaging with grief, and limitations of the

current body of literature and the theories in general.

Types of Grief

For decades, the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) dominated the general

understanding of loss and bereavement. Kübler-Ross's (1969) model, informed by her work with

terminally ill patients, included the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and

acceptance. Due to the nature of the work, the description of these stages mostly applied to the

steps leading to death, not necessarily the process following a loss. The field has since evolved to

explore the individualized and non-linear nature of grief (Doka, 2017) and the different forms in

which grief manifests.

Although not specifically time-bound, the acute signs of grief eventually resolve, usually

within the first 6 months to a year. Approximately 10% of the population continues to experience

these acute reactions beyond 12 months (Lundorff et al., 2017) and suffer from chronic grief

often referred to as complicated grief or prolonged grief. Whereas there seems to be a lack of

consensus regarding the preferred terminology (Iglewicz et al., 2020; Maciejewski et al., 2016;

Prigerson et al., 2021), complicated grief can be described as "rumination about the

circumstances of the death, worry about its consequences, or excessive avoidance of reminders

of the loss … tossed helplessly on waves of intense emotion" (Shear, 2012, p. 119). Cox et al.

(2015) found that when grief is left unaddressed in college students, it can manifest as anxiety,

depression, and chronic illness. Glickman (2021) found a similar 10% prevalence rate in college

students and indicated the importance of targeted intervention and referral to therapy, especially for disproportionately impacted students of color.

Trauma

This literature is included in this review as an attempt to recognize that death-related trauma affects not only the individuals most proximal to the deceased, but also caregivers who support the bereaved and members of a community who witness or experience loss indirectly. Trauma, often experienced as an event, involves "the confrontation with war, violence, disasters, sudden loss, serious illness, and other overwhelming and disturbing events" (Kleber, 2019, p. 1). Trauma is not always just an event, but can also be the response to the event that overwhelms the systems of care that give individuals a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman, 1997). As individuals work through their trauma, Van der Kolk (2015) argued that support is more than just presence: reciprocity is needed. This intentional connection creates a level of safety in which healing can begin.

In addition to trauma experienced directly, trauma can also be experienced vicariously or second-handedly. Figley (1995) wrote about the emotional costs of compassion fatigue (e.g., anger, irritability, hopelessness) and the secondary traumatic effects for caretakers of victims of trauma. Bell (2008) expanded on the vicarious traumatization of individuals in communities who are witnesses to violence and highlighted pitfalls if repeated exposure to traumatic events is not addressed or processed. Major events, such as 9/11 and the Pulse Nightclub shooting, can carry secondary effects (Blanchard et al., 2004; Jackson, 2017) like emotional response, heightened anxiety, and paranoia. Anthym and Tuitt (2019) called specific attention to the negative impacts (e.g., isolation and marginalization) of the continued (re)traumatization of Black faculty and administrators at historically White institutions due to the emotionally taxing labor of race work,

which can be extrapolated to the highly emotional work of supporting students through traumatic experiences, when they themselves are deeply affected.

Whereas post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often details the limitations caused by trauma like physiological and psychosocial detriment, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) focused on post-traumatic growth (PTG) and the positive impact of trauma. Their findings included the strengthening of relationships, discovery of new life purposes, locating inner strength, deepening spirituality, and renewing one's appreciation for life. PTG does not just happen, but rather, is made possible by conditions that promote its possibility. The establishment and use of trauma-informed practices that center safety, trustworthiness and transparency, support and connection, and collaboration and mutuality (Fallot & Harris, 2009) create environments that aid the processing of trauma and encourage growth. Engagement in problem-focused coping strategies were also found to result in positive changes (Lipp & O'Brien, 2022). Andriessen et al. (2018) found that many participants experienced a positive change to their confidence, self-reliance, and resilience in the time after the death of a loved one.

Loss Frameworks

The grief associated with death losses can lead bereaved individuals to question the cause, the impact, and their existence. As demonstrated in the various types of grief, grieving and bereavement is rarely time-bound or linear in its path (Doka, 2017; Stroebe et al., 2007). This section features some conceptual models of grief and bereavement that served as a foundation for this study.

Cummings (2015) offered a theory that is more closely connected with loss, although not exclusively about death and dying. Cummings's (2015) "Coming to Grips" theory included the following stages: discovering loss, assessing loss, mourning, and coping. The coping stage

included the steps of stabilizing, making sense, internalizing, and salvaging. Cummings (2015) also highlighted the concept of cascading losses, where one or more losses follows the initial loss, leading to feelings of overwhelm, exhaustion, or loss of control, all delaying the ability to "come to grips with the entire loss experience" (p. 2). The theory also hinged on the importance of personal life experiences, as Cummings (2015) argued that experiences are the lenses by which loss is processed and "are responsible for the most variation in the timing and course of action that people choose to use in addressing loss" (p. 4). This theory provided an accessible outline for the stages and resources a bereaved college student may pursue in their grief processing as they navigate through the assessment and mourning, but eventually attain coping strategies through meaning-making and persistence.

In her "Growing Around Grief" concept, Tonkin (1996) argued that grief never goes away, but growth occurs in time and adds richness and depth of experience for the bereaved individual. This development is often depicted as a ball in a jar. The ball represents grief and remains the same size whereas the jar gets larger around the ball, symbolizing the growth from life experiences dealing with the loss. Whereas the concept does not capture sources of complication or disenfranchisement, it presented an iterative process that is long-term, as opposed to the time-bound, staged model that is often thought of.

Loss, and the associated grief, is not always bound to death. There are plenty of life moments where loss is encountered: misplacing a cherished item, experiences delayed or canceled by a global pandemic, missed professional or romantic opportunities, or a career-ending injury. Servaty-Seib (2014) argued that in loss there is the opportunity for individuals to assess these life experiences and identify elements that are gains (i.e., positive take-away lessons) or losses (i.e., detriments or harm) using the Perceived Impact of Life Event Scale (PILES) as the

measurement tool. Servaty-Seib (2014) also noted the plasticity of these perceptions as informed by life experiences with loss.

Engagement with Grief

The use of frameworks can help increase understanding of the situation and provide a foundation for the bereaved to work through their grief. Edelman (2020) urged active engagement with grief: "growth after loss doesn't come from sitting around and waiting for growth to arrive. It's an active, effortful process of revisiting and reframing our memories, and creating new stories for ourselves moving forward" (p. 262). This statement is also the definition of mourning. Time does not heal; it is how the bereaved individual uses that time. This section includes thanatological research that helps bereaved individuals make sense of their loss through meaning-making (Neimeyer et al., 2008), tasks of mourning (Worden & Winokuer, 2011), the Two-Track Model (Rubin et al., 2011), and the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

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Meaning-Making

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Processing death can take various paths. Neimeyer et al. (2008) focused on the meaning-making of college students reflecting on bereavement to understand why. Neimeyer et al. (2008) expanded Neimeyer's (2001, 2004) previous work on meaning reconstruction to a college student population. Meaning-making is a mourning process where the bereaved person reexamines and reforms their worldview in light of a death loss. Here the bereaved individuals serve as "weavers of narratives that give thematic significance to the salient plot structure of their lives" (Neimeyer, 1999, p. 67). Meaning-making may manifest in a deepened perspective on life, a reordering of priorities, or newly emerged maturity or independence (Neimeyer, 1999, 2001, 2004). The nature of the death (sudden vs. expected) impacts this process. Other elements considered include the sense-making and benefit-finding (i.e., silver linings) processes and ways

that the bereaved continue connections with the deceased (Neimeyer, 2004). Neimeyer et al. (2008) specifically noted that most of this research is done on a monocultural (i.e., White) population.

Tasks of Mourning

Before engaging in an intervention, student affairs practitioners should be familiar with Worden and Winokuer's (2011) tasks of mourning, as the authors laid out a realistic timeline for the helper. The task-based model included the following four tasks: to acknowledge the reality of the loss, process the pain of grief, adjust to a world without the deceased, and find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life. Each of these tasks included a number of "mediators" that serve as observable markers of progress, although these tasks are not time-bound.

Worden and Winokuer (2011) noted that the pain of grief may be avoided by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol, substances often readily accessible for college students. If this avoidance behavior is observed, a referral to a mental health professional may be warranted. Students may also take additional time working through the adjustment to a world without the deceased person, as this transition has external, internal, and spiritual elements. One immediate external adjustment is the reconsideration of financial support and need for additional aid, since the death of a parent may significantly impact the student's ability to afford school. Because college is a time for exploration and values clarification (Astin et al., 2011; Parks, 2000), this major life event will likely leave a lasting imprint on the internal/intrinsic adjustments (i.e., personal development and growth) as students reexamine their identity. A spiritual adjustment, also potentially in flux during college, may take a different shape in wake of the parental death

loss. This change could be an increase in religiosity, a complete abandonment of previously held beliefs, or a mix of both (Lichtenthal et al., 2010).

<center>**Two-Track Model**</center>

A supplement to the arc provided by the tasks of mourning is another model that considered the bereaved individual's biopsychosocial positive and negative responses to the loss (Track 1) and the individual's relationship with the deceased (Track 2). The Two-Track Model (Rubin et al., 2011) took into consideration the context of the relationship and the interplay between these two responses. When students experience the death of a parent, there is a likelihood of a close relationship between the parent and student (Romero, 2021). This is an assumption, of course, that cannot always be made. Students may be estranged from their parent(s) for a number of reasons, so just because a parent died, does not necessarily mean students will experience a major disruption. This consideration is important, as students are not always coming from a two-parent, nuclear family (Lamb, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2010). As our students' family structures look different, practitioners must be prepared to adjust their responses based on the context of the situation.

<center>**Dual Process Model**</center>

Whereas the previously detailed strategies help to conceptualize the bereaved student's loss with respect to the relationship with their parent, the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) explored the practices of the grieving individual. The Dual Process Model presented focus alternating between loss-oriented (attending to grief and matters related to the death, the primary stressor) and restoration-oriented (daily tasks and responsibilities, also known as secondary stressors). The dynamic nature is intense, but working toward restoration strengthens adjustment and ability to exist in the larger world beyond the loss.

<center>23</center>

The Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) allowed for the toggling between the tasks and business of mourning and other responsibilities not related to the loss, which can be a lot for college students. Bereaved students may focus on their academic performance with the intention of keeping their minds off of the death, but this prioritization can be treacherous if equilibrium is not considered. Throwing themselves into their school work may help in the short term, but failing to recognize and respond to grief can have damaging consequences like disenfranchised grief or prolonged grief (Glickman, 2021; Lundorff et al., 2017). One way that practitioners may assist is by aiding students in collecting all the time-sensitive assignments into one place and developing a plan of when and how the items can be addressed, along with the help of others (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010).

Organizing their work may help ground students because everything else around them is in a state of upheaval. Managing multiple priorities is a challenge for traditionally-aged college students where academic rigor alone may be creating stressful situations aside from processing the loss of a parent. Institutions of higher education and their staff play a vital role in supporting an individual working through this challenging life event.

Criticism of Grief Models

There are researchers who are challenging the traditional thanatological frameworks in terms of populations studied and the ways that individuals engage with grief from different cultural perspectives. Using an autoethnography of researchers who had experienced the loss of a child, Willer et al. (2020) provided perspective on grief, particularly the processing of grief, using critical grief pedagogy. Critical grief pedagogy pushes back against limiting academic norms that do not often permit the expression of grief in learned settings like withholding emotions or not discussing the impact of loss after a certain amount of time. Willer et al. (2020)

24

recommended ways to incorporate loss and public exploration of mourning as a way to learn and communicate through an on-going examination of the impact of the loss and how it continues to reappear throughout an individual's life. Instead of keeping loss quiet, Willer et al. (2020) and Schuurman and Mitchell (2020) recommended public recognition and processing. This method may help bereaved college students recognize that they are not alone in this journey.

Another limitation of thanatological studies generally, including those involving college students, is that they often study overarching, generalized responses to death but few look at responses based on specific demographics or identities (Piazza-Bonin et al., 2015). Although there is a growing number of scholars studying underrepresented populations' bereavement (Boulware & Bui, 2016; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008; Moore et al., 2020; Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2013; West, 2020), the body of research is still predominantly centered around White identities. Poole and Ward (2013) referred to this White-washed ideal as "good grief" that is "gendered, staged, linear, White, and bound by privilege and reason" (p. 95). Goldsmith et al. (2008) noted that individuals from non-majority populations are at greater risk of the detrimental elements of grief since they have to navigate systems that have not been designed for them, oftentimes against them, at a vulnerable time. Oltjenbruns (1998) and Schoulte (2011) studied Latinx communities in explorations of grief. Still there are studies that specifically focus on these populations in light of violence and homicide (Piazza-Bonin et al., 2015; Sharpe & Boyas, 2011; Sharpe et al., 2013). Whereas these causes of death disproportionately affect these populations, there is a greater dimension to the nature of grief beyond violence.

An example of a study that incorporated identity in a thoughtful way while also lifting up the needs of that underserved population is Varga et al. (2022). This quantitative study looked at the holistic grief elements of Black female college students from six dimensions: physical,

behavioral, cognitive, interpersonal, emotional, and spiritual. The study found that cognitive and emotional effects were the most experienced. The authors took into consideration the higher prevalence of gun-related deaths in Black communities and medical emergencies caused by race-based deficits in the healthcare system. They emphasized the need for culturally responsive grief support for marginalized populations, especially Black women.

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College Student Bereavement

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The broad scope of the grief and bereavement mentioned in previous sections exists in a generalized sense outside of a situational context like college. This section explores the impact of death on bereaved college students, who are often experiencing growth in a variety of dimensions. Although this literature seldom mentioned specific relationships between the bereaved and the deceased (i.e., parental loss), there are developmental principles that apply. In addition to the impact of death on students, ways that institutions of higher education can support bereaved students is also detailed.

The qualitative and quantitative evaluations of grief and loss provided context to understanding the impact of loss on college students. Support is critically needed as the death of a loved one can significantly impact students physically (Hardison et al., 2005), behaviorally (Boelen et al., 2006), interpersonally (Stroebe et al., 2007), cognitively (Balk, 2008), emotionally (Harris, 1991), and spiritually (Walsh et al., 2002). These large tolls also impact students' academic performance and ability to persist (Cupit et al., 2016), thus impacting retention and graduation rates (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Bereaved individuals face a number of added stressors following the death of a loved one. Stroebe et al. (2007) compiled a review of studies related to the physical and psychological problems brought on by bereavement. Problems among survivors included increased mortality,

physical ailments (e.g., headaches, dizziness, indigestion), and psychological symptoms

including loneliness, depression, and suicidal ideation. Stroebe et al. (2007) did not offer specific

age ranges and included issues that may be more drastic for older populations. Harris (1991)

interviewed adolescents ranging in age from 13-18 years old following the death of a parent. The

findings included preoccupation with their parent's death, sleep disturbance, and issues with

school performance. Harris (1991) noted inability to concentrate, worry for the surviving parent,

and self-medicating with alcohol as after-effects of a parent's death on teenagers and young

adults. Hardison et al. (2005) noted insomnia related to grief. Reliance on substances as a coping

strategy is noted by Cousins et al. (2017), Cox et al. (2015), and Tureluren et al. (2022).

Cousins et al. (2017) explored the various predictors related to coping across four

domains related to college adjustment: academic, social, personal/emotional, and institutional

attachment. The researchers compared results between bereaved and non-bereaved peers.

Support from a peer group was paramount for bereaved students in the academic and social

acclimation and institutional connection.

Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) was one of the first, if not the first, study to

empirically examine the impact of a major death loss on academic performance. The authors

found that, when compared to their non-bereaved peers, bereaved students were severely

underperforming. This gap manifested in lower GPAs, fewer credits completed, and increased

risk of academic probation or dropping out. If bereaved students are not recognized and

supported, not only are they underserved, but their lack of support has institutional implications

from a retention and tuition perspective. Cupit et al. (2016) found similar results in their mixed-

methods study of 950 college students at two different institutions. Participants detailed

academic challenges experienced following a loss which included changes in study habits, lower

test scores, need for additional time to complete work, inability to concentrate in class, and decreased class participation. These data also suggested the closeness to the deceased as a predictor of mental health and academic performance. The qualitative component supported the influence in the closeness to the deceased, particularly on meaning-making, and highlighted the need for policy that supports grieving students.

Due to the nature and intensity of grief, sometimes the matter goes unaddressed. Balk (2008) found that many students did not believe that they needed help, indirectly prolonging the negative effects of grief. Some situations may be too traumatic to revisit so individuals avoid those instances completely. Experiential avoidance can be used as a positive coping strategy if individuals revisit the situation eventually (Shear, 2010). The avoidance is considered maladaptive if those scenarios are never addressed. Cox et al. (2015) combined data from two separate studies and updated prevalence figures to provide recommendations for grieving college students. Cox et al. (2015) found that at least one-third of students were within one year of a death loss and that almost 60% had experienced the loss of a loved one during their undergraduate college career. Cox et al. (2015) identified the ways that grief affects individuals physiologically, emotionally, and academically and leaned heavily on the support of campus counseling centers and selected a number of barriers that often prevent students from using that resource. Prolonged, unaddressed bereavement could result in complicated grief (Boelen et al., 2006) where these issues become chronic.

Grief is a process that is rarely linear and finite (Doka, 2017), but rather a circuitous path that can be navigated. Plocha and Bacigalupe (2020) used a grounded theory qualitative approach to explore resilience in young adults who were "doing OK" following the death of a parent. Based on their interviews, they identified markers of "doing OK" as the following: a

partial return to their "old selves," reconnecting or reengaging with life (following withdrawal), facing reminders of their deceased parent with comparatively less sadness, and staying in school. Whereas grief looks different for every individual, these indicators add nuance to broadly defined stages and challenge the notion that grief is something from which you simply "move on."

There is a sense of community within individuals who experience a death loss, especially those who lose a parent. Varga (2021) reflected on two projects that involved interviewing bereaved college students which explored the study participants' statements about how taking part in the study provided an outlet to process their loss as well as a way to contribute to a study that may make it easier for others to navigate grief. Varga (2021) stressed the importance of identifying themselves (the researcher) as a non-counselor and using self-disclosure about the topic of grief as a way to build rapport. I incorporated this recommendation into the current study when explaining the goals of the project and my positionality and proximity to parental death while in college.

Whereas this literature review was written to draw connection to parentally bereaved college students, that specific population was often an extrapolation since this specific population was seldom researched. In a recent analysis of research related to college students and grief (Hay et al., 2022), none of the 30 studies in the last 20 years explicitly mentioned students who had experienced the death of a parent. There are a few articles and scholarly works not included in the Hay et al. (2022) review. Murrell et al. (2018) and Plocha and Bacigalupe (2020) focused on resilience measures of parentally bereaved young adults. Lawrence et al. (2006) studied the effects of gender on grief response to a parent's death and found that there was no difference in psychological distress between males and females, but that females demonstrated a

more avoidant coping style. Individuals who lost a mother reported symptoms of hopelessness, depression, and suicidal ideation at a higher rate. Prior to Lawrence et al. (2006), and two dissertations (Edwards, 2005; Erickson, 1991), the last piece published on parentally bereaved college students was Silverman's (1987) study of a small sample of parentally bereaved college women. These studies are included to show the low frequency of this topic over a 30-year timespan. It is important to note that there are studies and publications that include parentally bereaved college students even if that population is not explicitly named. One example is *We Get It* (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015) that included narratives from bereaved college students, most of whom lost a parent.

Institutional Support

The above-mentioned studies all highlighted the challenges presented by grief. It is important for college educators to realize that students may be presenting these symptoms but may not seek assistance with processing their loss. These barriers have implications for student success and retention, as offering support in a timely manner can benefit students and encourage their persistence. The next section provides recommendations from the literature regarding support mechanisms for bereaved students.

When considering support offerings from an institutional perspective, timely intervention and support are crucial (Balk, 2008). Erickson (1991) completed a national study to assess institutional services provided to parentally bereaved students and advocated for streamlined ways to gather information and provide support. Twenty-seven years later, Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) revisited this topic and argued for institutional policies and practices (e.g., academic leaves and extensions) to support grieving students. Servaty-Seib and Liew (2019) further advanced this argument and suggested outlines for institutional policy structure.

The loss of a loved one can have major detrimental effects on survivors, especially since the loss may not be fully understood by non-bereaved individuals (Balk, 1997, 2001). In response to the diverse needs of students experiencing loss, researchers have advocated not only for timely intervention and referral to resources, but also flexibility regarding academic obligations as a student begins to mourn their loss and work through their grief (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Plocha & Bacigalupe, 2020).

Balk (2001) outlined the structure of a university bereavement center that would offer peer support and structured interventions, raise campus consciousness, and conduct research. These resources intended to normalize the experience and lessen the exclusionary effects of grief. Vickio (2008) recognized the power of individual grief counseling and provided detailed steps to create and implement grief workshops for students. Using widened group settings that expanded to involve larger groups and grieving communities, Vickio (2008) recommended goals, structure, and delivery of the group workshop that included who, when, and how to facilitate the intervention. Facilitation guidelines included the recognition of the diversity of the group, ways to avoid forcing disclosure, ways to make space for emotional reactions, and ways to avoid over-intellectualizing grief. A group setting can help normalize an incredibly isolating experience like grief. These recommendations included ways to minimize risk and present constructive ways to work through grief. These recommendations tracked with the guidance provided by Dobson et al. (2020) for ways to create "compassionate spaces" (p. 14). These elements also appeared in Crowley (2022), who examined the balance of peer and professional support, especially in a group setting delivered virtually as a result of the pandemic. Outside the literature, one example of a campus support group in line with these recommendations is Actively Moving Forward (AMF) (HealGrief, 2018), which has a number of chapters across the

United States and offers grieving students an opportunity to connect with peers who share similar experiences.

Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) examined institutional policies to enhance support for grieving students. One recommendation was bereavement language in leave of absence policies or providing extensions or incompletes for students affected by loss. When considering a diverse student body, the importance of culturally responsive policies cannot be stressed enough. Policies cannot be monolithic and must consider the variety of religious and spiritual lenses through which loss can be processed (Lopez, 2011; Walsh et al., 2002), the time sensitivity of certain religious customs (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008), or the idea that seeking help may not be culturally accepted or promoted (Neimeyer et al., 2008; Varga et al., 2022).

Specifically looking at parental loss, a national survey found that only four institutions had a formal policy that dictated institutional response to the death of a parent (Erickson, 1991). The same study encouraged the creation of a formal cross-divisional process that coordinates support for the parentally bereaved student, especially regarding academic and financial matters. Oftentimes, staff from residential life offices are the first to learn of or respond to news of a death so Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008) provided specific recommendations for live-in staff and faculty to best assist bereaved students. These steps included observing and inquiring, taking the time to listen, using statements that validate instead of isolate, offering tangible support, and referring to additional resources.

Nearly 30 years after Erickson's (1991) study, Servaty-Seib and Liew (2019) found that the number of institutions offering student bereavement policies has since grown to 44. The lack of support infrastructure is not a uniquely American problem, as the issue is also prevalent internationally. Valentine and Woodthorpe (2020) noted that of the 90 institutions studied in the

U.K., none offered a comprehensive strategy for student bereavement. The literature encouraged campus communities to actively train faculty and staff to respond to grieving students and to create spaces that welcome the processing of loss, especially with high incidences of grief on a campus (Vickio, 2008). However, this preparation may be a lower priority or limited by campus organization, politics, or resources, with the need for more research to be conducted about the various elements of grief and loss in a university ecosystem.

Servaty-Seib and Liew (2019) reviewed statistics that presented the prevalence of this experience and the challenges that bereaved students face and compared those needs to the low number of institutions that have a published bereavement leave policy. The authors highlighted a number of advantages of having a clearly articulated policy that included communicating respect and compassion, experience-enhancing accommodations, a reduction in administrative burden and increased equitable treatment through a centralized process, and a closer institutional affinity. Servaty-Seib and Liew (2019) posited their institutional policy as an exemplar for other schools, especially because the student policy mirrored the benefits provided to faculty and staff.

A comprehensive bereavement policy is one way that institutions can proactively address an event that is bound to recur. There are other domains where strategic, intentional forethought can help lessen the negative impacts of unforeseen events. Whereas the article drew on campus crises arising from acts of bias, Shaw Bonds and Callier (2022) provided guidance on an equity-minded approach to campus crisis management. The authors noted that no matter how much preparation goes into contingency plans, the planning often falls short, as students and staff from marginalized communities are often left further marginalized as a result of these short-sighted preparations. These needs must be considered as institutions develop support mechanisms for

bereaved students and work to support vulnerable populations at a time that lays bare the disparate resources available.

The resources recommended in the literature focus on intention and timeliness (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). Because the topic of death is sensitive, some practitioners may avoid bringing it up. The literature (e.g., Shaw Bonds & Callier, 2022; Vickio, 2008) encouraged campus communities to actively train faculty and staff to respond to grieving students and to create spaces that welcome the processing of loss, especially with high incidences of grief on a campus. This preparation may be a lower priority or limited by campus organization or politics. The second research sub-question of this study examined how colleges and universities respond to parentally bereaved students.

Connection to Student Development Theories

Navigating grief can be contextualized through a lens of student development. Whereas they are not explicitly focused on grief, connections to two theories can be drawn: Self-Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009) and Transitions Theory (Anderson et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Both of these concepts pivoted on life experiences that determine trajectories for individuals, which typically occur during a young adult's time in college.

Baxter Magolda (2009), in her longitudinal study, determined that individuals move from external formulas of meaning-making informed by parents and teachers to an internally-guided self-authorship after experiencing a crossroads between the two worldviews. Baxter Magolda (2009) specifically noted the development of self-authorship as a result of "'pain' or experience of cognitive dissonance that prompted them to reevaluate their lives or beliefs, gaining perspective on the cause of the pain through this reevaluation, and having good partners (or internal support) for thinking through their issues" (p. 216). While not directly exploring parental

34

bereavement, Bettencourt (2020) mentioned how the death of a parent can trigger the crossroads. The two worldviews intersecting at the crossroads are that of the external and internal influences. Parents often serve as major influencers of external formulas, and with their passing the self-authored internal voice has a chance to emerge.

Schlossberg's work defined transition as "any event, or non-event, [which] results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33). The death of a parent would certainly be classified as a transition. The transition can be navigated using the 4-S system (Schlossberg, 2008), which evaluated the strengths and liabilities in the following domains: situation, self, supports, and strategies. This system provided a framework on which bereaved students can model their grief journey. Situation referred to the nature of the transition (i.e., was it expected or unanticipated?). Self referred to the "person's inner strength for coping with the situation" (Schlossberg, 2011, p. 160), whereas supports indicated the external resources available to the individual. Strategies included the methods used to cope either through modifying the situation, controlling the meaning through cognitive reinterpretation, or managing stress through emotional discharge, self-assertion, or passive forbearance (Schlossberg, 2011). Although not explicitly linked, the 4-S System is modeled in the college students' narratives in Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) and the social supports detailed in Jones and Martini (2023).

Susan Parks (2000) used the metaphor of a shipwreck to describe a disruptive event in a young person's life where their meaning and purpose is called into question and where the individual is forced to piece together the wreckage in pursuit of a larger meaning. A death loss can also be considered a form of shipwreck, which can serve as a watershed moment in the life of a young adult where they gain greater understanding of their purpose in life. Parks (2000)

wrote: "until our meaning-making becomes very mature, in the midst of shipwreck there is little or no confidence of meaningful survival" (p. 29). These unplanned events can also result in unplanned directions, as explained by Happenstance Learning Theory (Krumboltz, 2009), which is often applied in career and academic advising.

The importance of support networks (or "networks of belonging" [Parks, 2000, p. 89]) for bereaved individuals again emerged as a vital role in the meaning-making framework. Mason (2018) found that the more extensive the support network, the more likely individuals were to report higher "purpose in life" scores. Similarly, Ostafin and Proulx (2020) highlighted the ways that a stronger sense of meaning was a predictor for positive well-being variables as well as helped to buffer stressor-related distress. Park and George (2013), in an attempt to understand individual aspects of meaning-making, realized that not every stressful situation can be separated into isolated factors, especially when meaning-making has no unified definition. Instead, they suggested looking at the situational factors as a whole through an integrative framework for conceptualizing meaning and meaning-making, including measurement approaches. Romero (2021) recommended bereaved caregivers who are at risk for high levels of grief (namely widows and women) should be referred for grief therapy interventions that foster meaning making. These recommended intervention strategies are helpful for practitioners working with individuals navigating meaning-making and building resilience following a death loss.

Summary

Lives are complex and multiple factors impact development. And there is no one size fits all in purpose, meaning-making, grief, or bereavement. It is vital to understand that these processes are highly individualized, and meeting individuals where they are is an important part of that development. Practitioners should continue to center the student and not deprive them of

the growth opportunities presented by these life experiences. This literature review provided a glimpse into the complex nature of both grief, bereavement, and meaning-making and it is important to recognize that individuals navigate these processes in their own ways and on their own time. These circumstances are not to be forced, but rather supported with intention by student affairs practitioners and institutions of higher education.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to

be not a state but a process. - C.S. Lewis

This chapter describes the methodological underpinnings of this study and explains the

method of data collection. This chapter also details the population that will be studied and how

participants were selected for the study within the ethical bounds of the institutional review

board. It also explains how interviews were coordinated, conducted, transcribed, and analyzed.

Lastly, this chapter addresses the plan used to maintain credibility and trustworthiness of the data

collected with respect to my positionality, personal history, and professional interests in this

topic.

As a reminder, the goal of this study was to expand understanding of the impact of the

death of a parent on a college student. The exploration of this topic and the resources students

avail themselves of (or not) may inform ways student affairs practitioners can better support

parentally bereaved students. The primary and subsequent research questions were:

1. *What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are*

   enrolled in college?

   a) What resources do these parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their

      college experience after the loss?

   b) How do colleges and universities respond to the needs of parentally bereaved

      college students?

Qualitative Methodology

An outcome of this study was to provide student affairs practitioners fuller perspective

into the needs of parentally bereaved college students beyond statistics available in the literature.

One way to capture the individualized nuance of these death-related experiences is through a qualitative phenomenological methodology that "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Narrative inquiry is an extension of phenomenology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), where the specific phenomenon researched is death. This section will further explain why this methodology and methods were selected for this study.

This study was based on a constructivist worldview where the understanding of a phenomenon (death in this case) is "formed through participants and their subjective views … they speak from meanings shaped by social interaction with others and from their personal histories" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 36). Similarly, phenomenology centers the phenomenon itself as the unit of analysis as opposed to the people or objects involved. Neubauer et al. (2019) stated that the goal of phenomenology is to understand what is being experienced by understanding *how* it is being experienced. This paradigm considered a collection of individuals' perspectives and interpretations of realities that "exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them" (Guba, 1990, p. 27). Whereas the experience of death is universal, interactions with the phenomenon are deeply personal. Due to this wide range, the constructivist worldview assumed that "the goal of research is understanding in context instead of the discovery of universal, lawlike truths" (Willis, 2007, p. 9).

Narrative inquiry was used because it captures the lived experience of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Narratives, especially those involving grief, build on a "broader constructivist approach … informed by a view of human beings as inveterate meaning makers– weavers of narratives that give thematic significance to the salient plot structure of their lives"

39

(Neimeyer, 1999, p. 67). Narratives provide "structure to that which we experience, creating order in disorder and establishing meaning in what can seem a meaningless situation" (Gilbert, 2002, p. 224). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that "experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19). The loss of a parent can be a devastating experience, and the retelling of that story, along with the consideration of the resources provided by an institution of higher education, may provide an opportunity for expanded meaning-making for the bereaved individual. The explanation of the philosophical and methodological duality of a narrative study, especially one involving the topic of bereavement, provided the foundation upon which this research was conducted:

> There is great diversity in the process of conducting a narrative study, and, in many ways, this approach is as much a philosophy as a method. The richness of loss and grief stories seen in narrative studies contributes to our understanding of the personal experience as well as the themes that transcend the individual stories. This approach may be uniquely well-suited to exploring the underlying meaning and evolving nature of the experiences of death, loss, and grief. (Gilbert, 2002, p. 237)

Theoretical Framework

The Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) served as the theoretical framework because it stated that a bereaved individual's focus alternates between loss-orientation (grief and death-related matters) and restoration-orientation (daily tasks and responsibilities). This model captured the duality of college students as students *and* mourners, as they are often caught between remaining connected to their dead parents while trying to continue their function as a college student (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2002). Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) juxtaposed the

Dual Process Model with college student bereavement and identified that academic and interpersonal domains would be the most commonly affected areas, further influenced by bereaved individuals' demographics and cultural background. The management of multiple priorities can be a challenge for undergraduate students between the ages of 17 and 23 in addition to mourning the death of a loved one. Student affairs practitioners, the intended audience of this study, will most likely encounter students navigating their grief while also experiencing the various dimensions and experiences of college, specifically their engagement academically and socially. Establishing order may help ground the student, as everything surrounding them is in a state of upheaval. Academic rigor may create stressful situations apart from navigating grief. Institutions of higher education and their staff play a vital role in supporting an individual working through this challenging life event as they oscillate between dealing with death-related matters while maintaining their persona as students.

Population Selection and Sampling Method

The population for this study was individuals who were enrolled at a college or university and experienced the death of a parent during their undergraduate enrollment. Completion of a degree program was not a prerequisite, as some individuals may have postponed or ended their enrollment as a result of their parent's death. In an attempt to keep the study as current and bound by the undergraduate experience as possible, only individuals who experienced the death of their parents in the last three years (since January 2020) were included. This timeframe coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, since this global experience also shaped the way institutions interacted with their students and affected how individuals grieved the death of a loved one.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) following the above-detailed criteria was used to build the participant pool. This recruitment method relied on an existing relationship rather than a "cold call" from a researcher. I sought referrals from student affairs professionals in two professional networks who knew current or former students who met the inclusion criteria. I am a member of the New England Deans group and used the network's listserv to send a call for referrals via email (Appendix A). My research was endorsed by the Association of College & University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) and the organization sent the recruitment email to 2,000 individuals from institutions in the United States with an enrollment size of 5,000 students or less.

I also partnered with Fran Solomon, the founder and CEO of HealGrief (which houses the Actively Moving Forward (AMF) app), about the dissertation. AMF is one of the options included in the resource information provided to study participants. AMF has a number of online communities including one for grieving young adults. Fran shared the study with members of the young adult community who met the inclusion criteria of the study. I did not receive any information regarding with whom the referral was shared. AMF is a supportive community that individuals have joined at no cost and Fran maintains personal connections with the members, so the relationship is comparable to the connections that student affairs professionals have with bereaved students. Fran also had the ability to focus her message specifically to individuals who were students and experienced the death of a parent.

The referral request included details about the study in the body of the letter and also in an attached flier. The letter included a link to the Informed Consent form for the study (Appendix B). The Informed Consent was a Qualtrics survey that gathered the participant's contact information for interview scheduling purposes. Recipients of the email had the option to

forward the request, in whole or in part, or send the attached flier to other eligible individuals. I

also provided the option of being connected to the individual directly to field questions about the

study. The letter clearly stated that a referral is not an obligation to participate.

In line with the consideration of the emotional labor in interactions regarding sensitive

topics (Hochschild, 1979), the consent form included language about the sensitivity of the topic

and the ability to take breaks as needed. I also clarified my role as a researcher, not as a

counselor, and advised that while this interview may be therapeutic, it does not replace therapy

(Varga, 2021). Whereas Patton (1990) claimed that "there are no rules for sample size in

qualitative inquiry" (p. 184), I followed the recommendation of 10 participants for a

phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998).

Participant Overview

Fifteen individuals completed the Informed Consent and were contacted to schedule a

first-round interview. Only 11 participants responded to schedule an introductory interview. All

the respondents met the inclusion criteria of being enrolled as an undergraduate student at the

time of their parent's death within the last three years except for one participant who was in

dental school at the time of her parent's death. Since that respondent was in a graduate program,

she was excluded from the study.

The first interview occurred in early May 2023 and the last interview was completed in

late August 2023. Nine of the 10 participants completed second interviews. The remaining

participant did not respond to multiple forms of outreach nor did they withdraw from the study.

The Informed Consent only asked for the participant's name and contact information and

did not collect demographic information. I used the introductory interview to collect

demographic information like age, salient identities, first-generation student status, and

information about their college careers like their year in school at the time of their parent's death and their degree completion status. I also asked about the participant's deceased parent and the nature of their death. Table 1 reflects this information and is classified by the pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

All participants fell in the age range of traditional-aged college students (17-23) with the average age being 20.4 years and the median age of 21. In terms of gender, the majority of participants (seven) identified as cisgender women, while two participants identified as non-binary individuals and one participant as a cisgender man. I intended to diversify the voices in death research, with the participants bringing various dimensions of underrepresented identities to the study as children of immigrants, first-generation college students, and a variety of races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. The identities named are those selected as salient for the participants and do not represent a comprehensive survey, but rather, the elements of their personhood held most dear to them.

The participants' parents' deaths were distributed throughout multiple class years and semesters as demonstrated in Table 2. This representation does not consider the time frame in terms of years, but lists when in their undergraduate career their parent died. Five students were taking courses at the time of the death, whereas five students were on break when their parent died.

Table 1. Participants

Name (Pronouns)	Parent	Cause	Age	Year	Identities	First-Generation	Degree Completion
Olivia (she/her)	Father	Stroke	22	Junior	Mixed race, Christian		Currently on leave (plans to return)
Gianna (she/her)	Father	Cancer, Covid	21	Senior	Italian-American, Catholic	X	Graduated
Emma (she/her)	Father	Cancer	21	Fourth year (5-year program)	Female, Baptist, born in Romania		Graduated
Molly (she/her)	Mother	Heart attack	19	Sophomore	Daughter of immigrants, woman, middle class, bisexual		Graduated
Em (they/them)	Father	Cancer	22	Senior	White, non-binary, queer, Quaker, middle class		Graduated
Preston (they/them)	Father	Heart attack	18	First Year	White, Agender/non-binary		Currently enrolled
Lei (she/her)	Mother	Heart attack	21	Third year	Filipino, female, Seventh Day Adventist		Graduated
Rae (she/her)	Father	Covid	19	Junior	Latina woman	X	Currently enrolled
Richard (he/him)	Father	Cancer	21	Senior	Nigerian-American, Black man, lower to middle income	X	Graduated
Catherine (she/her)	Father	Covid	20	Junior	First-generation American, multiracial, middle class	X	Graduated

Table 2. Parent Death Events in Academic Calendar and Class Year

	Fall	Winter	Spring	Summer
First Year	Preston			Molly[*]
Second Year				Rae[*]
Third Year	Lei	Catherine[*]	Olivia	Gianna[*]
Fourth Year		Em[*]	Richard	Emma[**]
Fifth Year				

Note. [*]Death occurred over break/not in session; [**]Enrolled in five-year program

Data Collection

This section includes an exploration of elements related to the data collection and validity. The protocols for the two interviews are included along with plans to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the qualitative data. This section also includes information about the intended audience for the study's findings.

This study assumed that bereaved college students existed in the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), which positioned the bereaved between dealing with the death itself while also managing other duties, particularly those related to being a student. Questions were designed to determine whether participants felt caught in between those two processes (see Appendices B and C). A question was asked specifically about the adequacy of the resources provided by the participant's institution to determine what support mechanisms were helpful or where additional resources were needed. This question focused only on the student perspective and was not compared with whether or not the institution actually offered some sort of support resources or program.

I also used literature on qualitative inquiry related to death and dying to develop the interview protocols. Gilbert (2002) noted that, due to their position, the researcher becomes "a

collaborator in a new and evolving story" (p. 225), and that it is important to clarify that while this process may be therapeutic, it does not take the place of therapy (Varga, 2021). Empathy, trust, and sensitivity are all required for "getting inside the lived experiences of others" (Wright & Flemons, 2002, p. 263) because the experiences shared are so intimate. Building rapport and establishing trust permitted the interviews to move beyond superficial responses and worked to uncover the deeper impact of the death. Other beneficial strategies included me identifying myself as a non-counselor and using self-disclosure about my personal experiences with death loss as a way to build rapport (Varga, 2021).

I used semi-structured interviews that followed a protocol, but included small deviations for follow-up questions. Because the research questions centered on resources available at the institution, a sample question is "What type of support did you receive after your parent's death?" This question included a follow-up question based on the participant's response. If they felt as if they received inadequate support, participants were asked what resources they *wish* they had received. Another sample question was "What advice would you give to someone who is in a similar situation?" This inquiry allowed the participant to reflect again on their experience and perhaps identify strategies or resources they did not previously mention.

Participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom. Interviews were recorded with audio and video formats and initially transcribed using Otter.ai technology. The combined interviews (introductory and secondary) lasted from 46 minutes to 129 minutes, with the average combined interview duration being 64 minutes. In total, the interviews lasted approximately 10 hours and 30 minutes. One participant (Lei) only completed one interview. As mentioned in the Informed Consent (Appendix B), the sensitive nature was addressed and participants were reminded that they could take breaks if needed. At the end of

each session, participants received a list of resources to continue their processing of their loss (Appendix E). Throughout the interviews, I kept a journal of key topics and the respective timestamps, along with any observable responses from the participants (e.g., tears, long pauses, blushing). The notes assisted me in theme identification during analysis. These strategies provided a record of my thinking and were used to add further explanation to the findings (Stake, 1995). The recordings and transcripts of the interviews were stored in a UNGC OneDrive folder after being downloaded.

Introductory Interview

Upon receipt of a completed Informed Consent, I followed up with the participants via email to schedule an introductory interview (~30 minutes). Participants were able to schedule their own interview time using timeslots on a Google calendar visible only to me. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. The introductory interview included the selection of the participant's pseudonym and followed a protocol that had questions about the participant's college experience and home life, the nature of their parent's death, the personal impact of their parent's death, and general demographic information (see Appendix C). While some of these questions could be gathered using a survey, I opted for a semi-structured interview to build rapport and trust during the discussion of a sensitive topic. Participants received a copy of the protocol in advance of the interview.

The audio and video of the interviews were recorded to aid transcription and the identification of themes. Following the introductory interview, I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interview. The completed transcript was shared with the participant to check for accuracy of their narrative and responses. The goal was to complete 10-20 introductory interviews as part of this study.

Second Interview

At the conclusion of the introductory interviews, I reviewed the transcripts and determined who would be invited to a second interview (approximately 45-60 minutes), which took a closer look at the impact of their parent's death and examined what students felt, how they balanced being a student with other obligations, and what resources they used (or did not use) (See Appendix D). Since I was trying to diversify the narratives included in death research, individuals with underrepresented identities were prioritized for invitation to the second round. The second interview followed a semi-structured protocol that was provided to the participants in advance. The same recording, note taking, and transcription processes described for the introductory interview were used for the second interview.

Confidentiality and File Security

Participants were asked to create pseudonyms and those pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees. The pseudonyms were used to protect privacy and ensure confidentiality. Qualtrics was used to gather the Informed Consent form. All information, including transcribed interviews, were kept in a protected OneDrive folder on the UNCG server. OneDrive is an approved application for secure research data in line with UNCG's policies.

Interview Procedures

The literature influenced the design of the protocol, which intended to focus the interview on how the bereaved student navigated college following the loss and tease out resources needed to guide that experience (Gilbert, 2002; Rowling, 1999; Varga, 2021; Visser, 2017; Wright & Flemons, 2002). The interview included questions about the college experience prior to their parent's death. The most specific questions focused on the impact of the death on their college experience (academically and socially), the support received (or lack thereof), helpful resources

they used, how they balanced priorities after the death, and any advice they would give to someone in a similar circumstance. These questions could have potentially generated responses that would fit into a series of large bins (e.g., loss of focus or motivation, social isolation, increased substance use, clarified perspective), but I was intentionally not bound to these categories when coding began. I was mindful not to try to fit codes into these categories automatically, rather letting the themes emerge from the codes found in the data.

I kept handwritten notes during the interviews as key concepts arose. The notes included emerging themes and specific quotes of thoughtful insights from the participants. I also noted the relative timestamp for ease of recall during analysis. The notes from the interview helped to identify possible codes, which were reviewed again once the interviews were transcribed. The interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai. I edited the transcription as I listened to the audio files. Specific sections or timestamps I noted were then highlighted to connect the real-time notes with the transcription.

Methods of Analysis

Riessman's (2008) approach to thematic analysis was used for the analysis: reading, re-reading, and listening to interviews. Each interview was listened to twice while reading along with the transcript. Because narrative inquiry was the methodology for this study, it was important for me to be incredibly knowledgeable about the participants' stories. Whereas AI technology provided the initial draft of the transcription, I edited each line to ensure accuracy, all the while realizing that "the time spent in transcription is not wasted, as it informs the early stages of analysis, and you will develop a far more thorough understanding of your data through having transcribed it" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16).

I followed the analysis pattern used by Plocha and Bacigalupe (2020), a recent qualitative study of parentally bereaved college students, which included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. On the first cycle, the transcripts were read in real-time with the audio recordings. Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to distill general themes from the transcript since this coding "summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 88). Process coding was used since it is an appropriate way to identify "ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 96). For example, the code of "worsened academic performance" included exemplifying quotes like "it severely declined, my academic performance" and "my academic performance went down a lot."

The transcripts were then read again, this time without the audio, to identify any additional codes not tagged in the first iteration. For the second cycle, axial coding (Boeije, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used since it "describes a category's properties and dimensions and explores how the categories and subcategories relate to each other" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 209). This process refocused analysis at broader levels and sorted and collated related data extracts into identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As these themes emerged, it was my responsibility to judge the categories for their internal homogeneity, how data within themes cohere meaningfully, and external heterogeneity or a clear and identifiable distinction between themes (Patton, 1990). For example, sympathetic responses from faculty/staff and assignment adjustments were individual codes, but eventually collapsed into a similar code as they were always mentioned together. These course-related adjustments were different from financial aid adjustments. Whereas they were both adjustments made by the institution, but from different

functions and processes, thus remaining separate themes. The processes were continued until participants' descriptions became repetitive and no new themes were identified (theoretical saturation; Riessman, 2008).

Lastly, selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to weave themes together into larger categories. For example, worsened academic performance was grouped with other immediate impacts of the death like avoidance, focusing on other things, distractions and difficulty managing tasks and priorities. Throughout these iterations, I used the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2013) and kept asking three questions recommended by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009): "What is the data telling me?," What do I want to know?," and "How does the data interact with what I want to know?" (p. 78).

After both interviews for each participant were coded the information was combined in a table for each participant. This table captured all the demographic information disclosed in the introductory interview along with exemplifying quotes for each code. I placed all the codes from each interview onto sticky notes so they could be manipulated and grouped (and re-grouped) to form coherent themes. A theme table (Appendix F) was also created to track codes across participants and demonstrate the formation of the larger categories and themes across the interview data.

Relational Integrity

There is a sacredness in the retelling of a deeply personal narrative and the sharing of an intimate space. Wright and Flemons (2002) studied the relationships of terminally ill patients and their families as patients prepared for death. At the core of their work was the concept of relational integrity, where the researchers were "humbled by the degree to which our *dying to*

know shapes our *knowing about dying*" (Wright & Flemons, 2002, p. 267). Detailed below are the parameters of researchers' choices regarding relational integrity:

1. We put the needs of research participants ahead of our own.

2. We approach participant observation as the impossible necessity of crossing the boundary between self and other.

3. We treat interviews as conversations, where participants are invited (never pulled or pushed) into an exploration of subjective (cognitive, emotional, and physical) experiences and understandings that they (and we) deem important.

4. We think of data analysis as a process of composing stories about participants' stories–that is, as the creation of meta-stories that retain the uniqueness of individual participants' voices and that weave these voices contrapuntally. (p. 268)

It was my intention to mirror these tenets as a modicum of respect for this study's participants and their deceased loved one.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a criterion of rigor in the constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I employed different approaches to establish trustworthiness of the qualitative data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A full member check was completed by sending participants a copy of the interview transcript and the codes that emerged from the interview. Participants were able to clarify statements they made and validate my interpretation of their statements. I also sought peer feedback from my committee chair to discuss and debrief the findings and analyses (Leung, 2015; Merriam, 1995). The dialogue with this scholar-practitioner helped to categorize and interpret the information gathered during the interviews. I also kept a research log to track reactions, memo emergent ideas, and check potential biases in the interpretation of the narratives.

These efforts worked together as a form of triangulation (Torrance, 2012), where elements of these various sources (e.g., facts about the death, student status at the time, emerging themes) were explored to see if they informed and supported each other.

Researcher Reflexivity

What the researcher knows and how they apply what they know is a crucial part of qualitative narrative research. It is important to confront yourself as a researcher along with your biases; this challenge is one of the most difficult aspects of qualitative research (Ely et al., 1991). Regarding research into death and bereavement, Rowling (1999) shared that "while reflexivity is important in qualitative research on sensitive issues, it is vital in research on loss and grief" (p. 178). Visser (2017) confronted the emotions that surfaced during their research into death and dying and noted three components that centered this study: "(a) the cultural background a researcher brings to the field; (b) personal experiences that impact the project; and (c) the way research impacts the researcher" (p. 8).

This three-pronged context from Visser (2017) had particular resonance for me. The cultural background that informed my work is growing up with a funeral home as the family business. The proximity to the funeral industry caused both a normalized, desensitizing effect (i.e., I'm not as apprehensive regarding funereal processes and the presence of dead bodies) and a near-constant realization of the temporary, fragile nature of life. Whereas I did not opt to go into the family business, I carry a similar familiarity with the process and the realization of death into the helping profession of student affairs. For the second prong, experiencing the death of my father in the summer prior to my first year of college had a tremendous impact on my collegiate experience. Navigating grief five hours away from my loved ones during my first year of college certainly informed my identity and affected my interpersonal development during my

undergraduate career. Lastly, my work as a student affairs practitioner directly benefits from the findings of this study. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge these concurrent influences during this study. This acknowledgement aligns with Rowling's (1999) recommendations of balancing the personas of the "counselor I" and "researcher I," while being "along with" the interviewee, and not just as an observer (p. 172). My personal experiences certainly influenced my perspective on the participants' narratives, but I made a conscious effort not to project my own experience (and subsequent growth) on the participants and their stories.

Summary

The intention of this study was to capture the stories of individuals who have experienced the death of a parent when they were in college. In addition to listening to these narratives, I aimed to identify the impact of these experiences on the participants and describe how institutions of higher education assisted the student in navigating this difficult situation. I used narrative inquiry, which is an extension of phenomenological methodology, to achieve these goals. This chapter detailed the framework and methods used to recruit participants from a specific population, gather data on their experience, and analyze that data into a cohesive story. The subsequent chapters will discuss the findings from this study and the implications of those findings for student affairs practitioners and future researchers.

If I could steal one final glance, one final step

One final dance with him

I'd play a song that would never ever end

'Cause I'd love, love, love to dance with my father again

- Luther Vandross, "Dance with My Father"

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to expand understanding of the impact of the death of a parent on college students and identify patterns and support opportunities for student affairs practitioners and other helpers by building on a conceptual framework that incorporated theories related to grief and loss with a student development lens. This study aimed to explore how students from a variety of backgrounds process parental death and how institutions of higher education can best support them during and through that process. Considering the context of the individualized experience and the institutional response, the following research questions framed the qualitative study.

1) *What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are enrolled in college?*

   a) What resources do these parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their college experience after the loss?

   b) How do colleges and universities respond to the needs of parentally bereaved college students?

An analysis of interviews with parentally bereaved participants regarding their college experience showed themes in three categories: (a) the immediate impact of the death loss (often

56

negative); (b) the resources and support participants took advantage of; and (c) the services and support to which students wish they had access. A full listing of themes and their frequency can be found in Appendix F. These themes all existed within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic that served as the basis for the inclusion criteria of the study and which was mentioned at some point by all participants and specifically elaborated upon by six participants. Grief and bereavement experiences were also influenced by the interplay and intersection of participants' self-described salient identities.

Grieving in a Global Pandemic

It would be very difficult to study this topic without taking the Covid-19 pandemic into account. The inclusion criteria (death since January 2020) were intentionally selected to identify participants who experienced parental death loss recently and, most likely within, the context of a global pandemic. It should come as no surprise that Covid was mentioned by nearly all the participants as an influencing factor, either in the loss itself or the grief processes that followed.

The purpose of this section is to recognize this universal event and how it impacted the participants. Molly (19, sophomore, daughter of immigrants, woman, middle class, bisexual, large private university) was in her first year in college when the pandemic began. Her spring semester was disrupted by Covid and then her mother died unexpectedly right before the start of her sophomore year. Molly shared that "It's really hard, because, like the year before, wasn't in Covid, and the year after was Covid. So like inherently, the social structure is completely different." Em's (22, senior, White, non-binary, queer, Quaker, middle class, small private college) story is slightly different. Although their father died in January 2020, Em was navigating their grief as the shutdowns began and their campus closed:

It's hard to figure out what was institutional support that I would have gotten sans Covid,

I think also, right. Everybody got a little flexible with deadlines. And I don't know how

much of that, right, was "[Em] has a dead father" and how much of that was like "Oh, the

world just radically changed. We need to change our expectations."

The context of this "radical change" was important to consider, as it colored the experiences

shared in this study.

Even with the world changing, participants were experienced life-changing events. Em,

for instance, admitted that the death of their father would have been disruptive in its own right,

but went on to say that the changes "felt more accentuated because it was stacking crises." Rae

(19, junior, Latina woman, first-generation college student, large public university), in addition

to being a first-generation student who started college at 17 because she was a grade ahead, was

already having a difficult re-entry to home life when her father died after contracting Covid on a

business trip. Rae bemoaned the fact that "I feel like I've had to grow up in a lot of

unprecedented situations that not normally people have to go through." Covid was everywhere.

The virus was the cause of death for fathers of three participants (Gianna, Rae, and Catherine).

Preventative measures like limited access or social distancing affected how participants and their

families said goodbye to their loved ones (or not) and how funerals took place. Gianna (21,

senior, Italian-American, Catholic, first-generation college student, midsize private university),

whose father had cancer and contracted Covid due to his weakened immune system, described

her experiences with restrictive hospital protocols:

Yeah, so we were there, but it sucked because they wouldn't let us in the room with him.

So, it was through the big glass window doors at that point. It was like July, August.

There was that resurgence of Covid, so they weren't letting anybody come in. Like my

aunt and my uncle wanted to go see my dad, but like they wouldn't let in any visitors that

weren't … immediate family or something, I don't know it was like this whole thing. But

yeah, we were—my mom, my sister and I were there when it happened. We obviously

made the decision, and then it happened within minutes.

Molly experienced a similar limitation when her mother's funeral was forced to be a socially

distanced outdoor gathering: "I think, like, the like taking care of loved ones, and managing grief

was hard because it was the pandemic. So you couldn't really do that unless it was, like, outside,

six feet away."

Covid-related restrictions also influenced how resources were delivered and had lasting

academic and social effects (Sirrine et al., 2023). Catherine (20, junior, first-generation

American, multiracial, middle class, first-generation college student, midsize public university),

whose father died from Covid during her junior year, had everything going for her: "I had a great

social life. School was going great. Everything was great … until Covid happened." The

pandemic introduced major disruptions to the social aspect of college along with the classroom

experience. Gianna detailed the rough re-entry she had upon returning to in-person classes and

testing after spending the second half of her sophomore year and entire junior year remotely:

We had … like the first test in my child psychology class. I hadn't taken a test in-person

in like a year and a half. So I was like, "oh, I'll be fine," like I thought I'd be fine, and

you know I like looked it over a little, and then the test came, and like, I don't think I

failed it, but I didn't get like a great grade, and I was like, "Oh, my God! I don't know

how to take a test in person anymore." I don't know how to study or anything.

In addition to balancing the academic and social adjustments caused by social distancing and

virtual learning, the services provided by institutions also had to change. Early on in the

pandemic, there was a steep learning curve as programs and resource delivery moved online. Molly described her frustration with the limited accessibility and ease of use with her university's counseling services program. She had difficulty scheduling an appointment beyond the initial crisis outreach, all while juggling new insurance that she secured after losing coverage from her late mother's work plan. "I think Covid also complicated all of this, because, like they didn't really know how to run their staff during Covid and everything," said Molly, although she stated that her interactions with the same office during her senior year were markedly improved from the early pandemic period.

The isolation brought about by quarantine and lockdown caused a chasm between dimensions of the various experiences that are usually seamlessly described as "college." The constantly changing regulations and safeguards during this period segmented students to their existing pods and limited interaction or confined their connections to Zoom rooms that severed connections after the meeting ended. Outside of the uncertainty brought about by the global pandemic, consider navigating the catastrophic loss of a parent. Molly shared how the restrictions during this time period clearly limited her ability to take advantage of the benefits permitted by access to different groups and spaces:

> I went … This was also because of the stupid pandemic, but I had no choice but to go
> from like living at home, and just seeing my family, to living in college and just seeing
> my friends, and it would, I think it would have been so much better if I like, still lived at
> home, but had the chance to hang out with my friends sometimes, or like still lived at
> home, but also did my school work, having, like the chance to slowly transition back into
> like quote, unquote normalcy, I think, would have been a lot better than having to do like
> 0 or 100%. … One was like, really sad and like super emotional and like everything

revolved around my mom's death. And the other one was like fun, and nothing revolved

around my mom's death. And like I was living in like a vacuum where like this and this

problem didn't affect me because it didn't affect anybody else there. So it was like, not a

real thing. So they were just way too opposite, and neither good.

While the pandemic certainly highlighted global health disparities and brought about

some of the darkest days in recent memory, there were moments throughout where humanity was

demonstrated and optimism for a better future shined through a challenging time. For instance,

between their father's death and the initial lockdown in Spring 2020, Em interviewed for

graduate school and received a job offer, which was rare at that time:

> I believe I got that call like a week or two after my campus shut down, so I remember
>
> walking around on the phone with the representative from the institution as she made the
>
> offer. And I just was walking around this like empty campus thinking about like A: I
>
> want this, right? This is something that I hoped for. But B: there wasn't really other
>
> options, because my peers who are applying to jobs were not getting them because
>
> nobody was hiring, because it was March of 2020.

Despite the virus killing her father, Catherine was able to reflect on the lessons of the pandemic

and provide perspective to her grief and a way forward:

> I definitely think my social aspect had already been kind of, pardon my French, fucked
>
> because of Covid, but after my dad's passing, it kind of taught me like not everyone is
>
> here tomorrow. Trying to just live your best life while being safe.

This chapter starts with this topic to establish context for the findings of the study. The death of a

parent is a disconcerting experience by itself, let alone when it occurs during a time of major

upheaval around the world. Much like grief, so much was lost as a result of the pandemic, but

new insight, perspective, and meaning was made as a result of those trials. The same resilience and perseverance demonstrated over the course of the last three years during Covid-19 was also embodied by the participants as they navigated a new normal in their personal lives amidst a new global context.

Impact of Death Loss

The first theme that emerged from the interviews answered the primary research question of the study: "What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are enrolled in college?" This section includes details about the topics discussed relating to the impact of the death loss. The experiences described in this section include worsened academic performance and decreased motivation, a blurred grief process that included periods of shock and numbness, ways participants distracted themselves or avoided the topic by focusing on other things, how difficult it was for them to manage tasks and balance priorities, and how they lacked awareness of institutional support or experienced barriers when they tried to access those resources.

Worsened Academic Performance and Decreased Motivation

All the study participants experienced their parental death loss during the semester (five) or within two weeks of the start of an academic term (five). The fallout from the death of their parents caused their academic performance to dip and the most frequent explanation for this decline was the lack of motivation to attend classes or complete work assigned for the courses. The participants who received lower grades clarified that this performance was out of the norm for them and was not what they experienced before their death loss.

One example is Olivia (22, junior, mixed race, Christian, midsize, public university), who was attending a four-year institution after she completed an associate's degree at her local

community college. Olivia's father died near the end of the spring semester of her second year after suffering a debilitating stroke two weeks prior:

> My academic performance went down a lot … I used to be, you know, shooting for those straight As, but after that I kind of have a more "Cs get degrees" attitude. I was doing the bare minimum because I lacked the focus to do anything.

Em took a similar approach when deciding how they could allocate their time during the spring of their senior year:

> I think a lot of that final semester was like triaging my academics. What are the most urgent things that carry the most point values? And how do I get Cs on them? It really was just I needed to get the minimum work that I could get done done.

Rae considered taking the semester off, but was encouraged to try because her late father was a strong proponent of education and she had signed a lease for an apartment off-campus. She described how, even though she was trying her hardest, there were factors that were limiting her academic success:

> It severely declined, my academic performance. Looking back, I wish I took that semester off just to recover. But everyone in my life was just like, "Oh, he wouldn't have wanted you to do that." So I went into classes, and I later would be diagnosed with PTSD from the event. So my memory was shot, like I would read stuff and not recall any of it. And that was really frustrating for me because I graduated from college, I mean, graduated from high school with like a 4.3. I was doing really good in college. I was getting my GPA up, and then this happened right before. So I ended up failing a majority of my classes that semester and I did not reach out for help because I couldn't even talk about it.

This poor academic performance dealt a significant blow to Rae's academic progress: "it put me behind a year. Yeah, just because of the classes that I missed and failed and had to retake." Rae is now in her final academic year and is on track to graduate. Olivia's failing grades that semester influenced her decision to step away eventually: "looking back on it, I really should have taken time off and just withdrew and took the time because my grades did suffer and my GPA did suffer." Olivia is currently taking courses at the local community college and hopes to return to the university in the near future to complete her bachelor's degree.

Some participants described how preparing for and attending the funeral services directly impacted their attendance and grades. Olivia missed a final exam because she was attending her father's funeral. Her attention was elsewhere and she was not an active participant in finals: "I know I wasn't studying for anything. I was just going and taking it. I, I couldn't do anything related to school." Catherine also described difficulty with her focus after attending her father's funeral at the start of the spring semester, at the expense of her grades:

So when the spring semester started, it was like, I'm thinking, it was like two and a half weeks after he passed away. So I kind of disassociated myself from the school work in general in the beginning of the semester and then, when my grades started to slip, that was when I was like "hmm … we gotta get back." So it was kind of, it was hard to go back to school work when this was still fresh in my head, like the funeral happened within the first week of school starting or like the first weekend of school starting. So it was hard for me to like keep my attention on school when I had to attend the funeral.

Six students attended school more than an hour away from their family home or where the services were held, so attending both the funeral and resuming class participation was not conveniently accomplished.

Preston (18, first-year, White, agender/non-binary, small private university) was in their first year of college when their father died after a cardiac event. They shared that doing the work was not too much of a challenge, it was the portion of their grades associated with attendance and participation that were the greatest hurdle:

> I think the hardest hit was the time that I had to be at home. I missed about five or six classes in a row, just because I was out of the state, and I couldn't attend them. I had sort of gave my teachers a bit of a heads up. I think they gave me a little bit of leniency, but I, I'm pretty used to separating academics from personal things, and I was pretty able to maintain at least decent grades.

One professor noticed Preston's increasing absenteeism and reached out from a place of concern. Upon learning that Preston's father died and that Preston struggled to attend classes, the professor locked their participation grade in at a B+ to insulate their grade in the course. Preston explained that their lack of motivation did not stem from depression, but being "a lot more lethargic … I was just sort of less willing and less motivated to do things."

For some participants, the detrimental effects of their parents' death manifested in depression or a sense of meaninglessness or existential questioning. Just as some participants were trying to navigate finals or manage to make it to class, Em hoped to accomplish two major projects in the last half of their senior year, which were majorly impacted as they dealt with their father's death:

> I became really depressed after the death of my father, or more acutely depressed than I had been before. And that really impacted my ability to get my work done. You know it was my senior spring, so I was doing my capstone work, and then also my undergraduate thesis, and both of those projects were pretty significantly impacted… I think both were

projects where I bit off maybe as much as I could chew when I was at like baseline doing

well, and quickly became more than I could chew after my father passed.

Like Em, Richard (21, senior, Nigerian-American, Black man, lower to middle income, first-

generation college student, small private college) was in the spring of his senior year when his

father, who lived in Nigeria, died unexpectedly. It was still early in the semester (February) and

Richard sensed a slowdown in his productivity as he faced larger philosophical questions:

> It made it really hard to care about work. Work became, I was like, what's the point of
>
> this? Why am I doing this right now? I already struggled with motivation and academic
>
> work a lot. So, having this happen definitely made it really hard to also just pick up my
>
> work. And you know, thankfully, my professors are very understanding, almost every
>
> single one of them was, which I really appreciate. But yeah, there was definitely a
>
> massive slowdown in the amount of work I was producing.

In addition to the quantity, the quality of Richard's output also suffered: "It was really hard to

care about work at all, and if you don't care about your work, the work's not going to be good."

Rae faced a similar dilemma that translated to reduced productivity and missed assignments:

> And I was like, "Oh, yeah, I have an assignment due that was actually due like three days
>
> ago," or I would know and I just didn't care. I was just like everything, just kind of felt
>
> meaningless. I was like, "Okay, if I have my planner and I have my stuff written in it, I'll
>
> read it, and I'll be like, you know, I don't really care."

Blurred Grief Process, Shock, and Numbness

While seven participants' parents died after a prolonged illness, three died unexpectedly

and suddenly. Regardless of the nature of the loss, participants described the experience both

viscerally and with respect to time. Sometimes this feeling was acute, whereas, sometimes these

66

experiences lingered for weeks and months. The following examples detail how participants were left feeling shocked or numbed as their immediate processing was a blur.

Emma's (21, fourth year of five-year program, female, Baptist, born in Romania, large public university) father died after a lengthy battle with cancer. She watched as her father's health declined after he received a terminal diagnosis, and despite being fully aware that his move to hospice was the final step, while his death was not surprising, it still came as a big shock. Emma was taking summer courses while also attending to her father's funeral arrangements. She described this very busy time:

> The funeral planning was kind of like a whirlwind; there was so many things you had to consider, and it was very fast after the death and then I was also kind of focused on emailing my professors and delaying my assignments. And then after the funeral, and I can't remember exactly how long I delayed them for, I think it was like a few weeks, maybe 2 or 3 weeks. So after those, after that time I had to actually do the assignments, like push through. And after that was over, then the kind of I think the grief overwhelmingly hit me.

Olivia's experience with her father's death was similar. Her father had a stroke, his second in as many years, and was hospitalized for two weeks before he died. Olivia said, "I just had this feeling when I found out, it was like my heart dropped into my stomach, and that feeling lasted for months." Olivia and her brother were responsible for the funeral preparations for their father, as his next of kin, because their parents were divorced. Olivia described her lack of motivation to get out of bed and address even routine tasks:

Just thinking back to it, it was mostly, I guess I felt numb just going through it, and like

my mom would tell us something we had to do, and I would do that, and then go back

and lay in the bed, and like just kind of a numbing feeling.

Rae also credited her mom with keeping everything on track, which Rae was not able to do,

especially since her father got sick, was hospitalized, and died on a business trip to Chicago.

I don't even think it was me, as much as I would like to give myself credit. I think my

mom was just running go, go, go. And I was like, "Okay, we're here now in a meeting." I

don't remember a lot of like the first few months.

Some participants had difficulty recalling the events immediately following the death of

their parents and the weeks thereafter. Gianna described her experience with so much going on:

I also feel like it was just like, so … you know, it was so fresh and everything so …

everything is just like a blur … like you're just like going through the motions kind of,

and like it doesn't even feel like it's real life. And then like, it just hits you. So a lot of it,

I feel, like gets blocked out and is like a blur.

Gianna relied on her mother and other relatives to keep things on track. Rae also relied on family

to get through the initial wake of her father's death:

"Manage" is a … I don't know if I would apply this word to my situation, because I felt

like I was the only one losing my mind. I think my family for sure held me up way more

than I was able to help them.

Catherine experienced a similar feeling that lasted for nearly four months after her father's death.

She stated that, during that time, she "didn't want to talk to anybody and I didn't care to hear

about like how everyone is doing." Catherine went on to describe how her grief manifested and

why:

I think, after the weeks that followed, when he passed away, it was really hard for me to

go back to how I was. I kind of felt numb, and like there was kind of a big piece of me

missing especially like, since I did have a really close relationship with my dad. It was

really hard for me to accept that he wasn't here.

Avoidance, Focusing on Other Things, Distractions

While certain times following the death felt like a blur for some participants, that period

was sometimes filled with sadness and preoccupation with grief for other participants. Another

impact of the death was how participants focused their attention on other topics or matters as a

way to avoid or distract themselves from thinking about the death of their parents. These

diversions took the form of increased focus on school work, more time socializing with friends,

or spending time alone watching movies or drinking heavily.

Participants reported finding ways to stay busy to keep their minds off of the death of

their parents and avoid situations like Gianna described where "I would just like be at home, and

just be like so lonely, and bored and stuff, and then I would just think about everything, and just

like cry and stuff." Molly leaned into old habits by trying not to think about the concern at-hand

and focus on topics she was able to control:

I think it took a really, really long time for it to feel real and I think my kind of strategy

like forever and ever, is like to not think about things. I think I watched a ton of movies

and tried to do things that stopped making me think of it. I didn't really want to talk about

it when people brought it up, like I would get kind of annoyed that they were making me

feel this way … I mean, I'm sure I was like sad and cried a lot, and like did think about it.

But I think I focused a lot of my efforts on to the logistics, I remember, like immediately,

printing out the form to, what's the word? Reapply for financial aid. And like being like,

okay. Now, I have to figure out my insurance. Now I have to do this. Now I have to like

what else? plan the funeral. And I think my idea was always like, what's the next step?

What can I do to make the situation better? I completely pushed myself into school and

did more school work than ever. And I was like taking more classes than ever that

semester, like, I don't know why I did that, but I did … I don't know if that was like a

hundred percent related to the death of my mom, but it kind of felt like it was, like I had

to like balance out my previous stuff.

Other participants shared that focusing on their social lives kept their minds off of their

sadness. In addition to distracting herself from thoughts of her dad, Gianna was also making up

for lost time since she was completely remote her junior year and was trying to salvage her

senior year, especially since she was graduating a semester early:

So we were going out like all the time, like every weekend. And I think that part of that

was like yes, like I wanted to go out, but I think I was also using that as a way to just deal

with everything. Cause I'm the kind of person where I'm just always busy, or like always

doing something. Like, that's just how it's been throughout my whole life. And then,

when I'm not busy, like when I have free moments, I just would, think about everything

constantly, just like replay everything over and over in my head, so going out, and just

being busy was good for me. But I don't know. Maybe when I look back like, maybe I

needed time to just … you know, just do nothing sometimes, and just be in that silence.

But, I don't know. Even now, I don't really like that.

Richard, who was also in his final semester, also relied on a social life as it provided some

normalcy and routine:

70

I tried to do things that would make me happy. I knew that like if I just kinda like retreated into a hole, things would get bad. So I did still try to go out, hang out with my friends, go to a party on the weekend. Just try and keep my social life as normal as possible, because I knew that if it declined then things would just start to get bad. So I felt that trying to maintain my social life was like the best thing I could do, just like my level of social engagement.

While some individuals turned outward to existing friend groups, some participants turned inward. These participants retreated because sometimes interactions with peers or a return to former routines was too much to bear. This isolation was described by two participants as a tool for self-preservation to help them make it through their grief. Molly described how she limited her contact with her family:

I wanted to check in on like how my dad was doing, but if, like I saw him cry, then I would get upset and like I didn't even want to like attend to my grief, like, I'd rather just like, "Okay, let's no one talk about it." And like, that'll be better. And like same with like my grandma, so my mom's mom, and my mom's friends like, I think there was probably a way to handle that better where I was still in contact with them. But it was also like really like shitty and annoying to do it. So yeah, I definitely pulled away.

Whereas Molly pulled away from her family, Em began to isolate themselves from their friends upon returning to campus to start the semester after burying their father:

I remember a lot of isolation and a lot of both like self-isolation and isolation from others. I think it, it was mutual at times. I don't know if this is an element that we have talked about; I started drinking really heavily, and was like a solo drinker. So I think that added to the isolation, was, I just was avoiding my friends, getting drunk alone.

71

Regardless of the direction or type of preoccupation, participants described ways they actively

sought to avoid or bypass dealing directly with the increased emotions or pain caused by the

death of their parent.

Difficulty Managing Tasks and Priorities

Whereas all participants were either in classes or close to starting classes, there were

numerous responsibilities they had to manage. They had to allocate a finite amount of time and

energy to address matters related to the death of their parent (e.g., attending to their grief and

managing arrangements) while maintaining their student persona in academic and cocurricular

capacities. Participants expressed the challenges they encountered as they tried to manage

everything at once, and it often did not go well.

Em described themselves as "highly involved" on-campus, but had already transitioned

away from some of their engagement to make way for an increased academic load their senior

year. At the time of their father's death, "the biggest things were academics and working in Res

Life." Em went on to explain how they prioritized their responsibilities as the spring semester

was about to begin:

Attending two funerals became priority number one … I don't know. Between my

academics and my social, cause, I really, neither was going well … I did not have

capacity to do either of those well. I did not have capacity to do *one* of them well. So I

really did both of them actively poorly. I was not a good friend. I was not a good person

to be friends with. I was not a good student.

Richard was also involved across campus, but did not lessen his load like Em. At the time of his

father's death, Richard was still student government co-president, a captain for his sports team,

and trying to manage the completion of his thesis. He described that he was "definitely stretched

72

very thin on top of trying to grieve. I was doing my best to try and keep up that other side, the operating side, but not really having enough space to give the grieving side." When asked how he attempted to balance his priorities in the final months of his senior year, Richard provided an honest assessment of his performance:

Well, I didn't. I definitely did not, did not think about balancing. I, not whatsoever, I mean. I think, if anything, maybe I prioritized schoolwork because I just didn't want, not that I ever thought I was going to fail, but I also just didn't want to fall so far behind where I would not enjoy the rest of my senior year. So I think I definitely placed the priority on academics out of all three. But I was not putting thought into balancing whatsoever like. It's like I said before, the way I primarily operated was really like blocking and tackling, just that there's a problem that arises. There's something. Let's just deal with it now. Or let's try and do something about it now.

Emma was about to complete her summer term classes when her father died. In addition to the final papers she had to write, she was part of a group project from which she had to excuse herself. Like Richard, Emma dealt with situations not in a strategic, planned order, but more so as they arose or presented themselves. Emma described her process chronologically:

I first dealt with my academics because that was like timely because I had assignments due, so I dealt with that, reaching out to professors and all that. And then helped with the funeral planning because it was also, I felt like that was the order, it naturally happened in. And then, after that was all said and done, and then doing the assignments. Then I actually felt like I really had to deal with the grieving. That's when I wasn't busy anymore. I wasn't … My mind wasn't occupied with other things, and that's when I actually had to take care of my emotional health.

Rae's prioritization was slightly different as it centered on her relationships with her family and the care they were able to provide each other:

> Student engagement was probably the lowest for me. I would say I tried to have school
> work in a higher priority, but it probably was not my number one. It was totally my
> family. I just, it just kind of felt like all of us were kinda pawing at nothing and trying to
> figure out where we were.

Catherine shared a similar sentiment and described her method for prioritization as a juggler trying to keep all the balls in the air:

> And it was just kind of getting overwhelming with like the amount of work, and then like
> trying to take care of myself, and then also like taking care of other people, and then
> work at the same time, too. So it was just a lot.

In the second interview, participants were asked what they might have done differently if they had a chance to revisit the time of their loss. In response to this question, Rae reflected on the time following her father's death and shared a lesson she learned from trying to balance the priorities: "You have to take a second and realize what your priorities are. Not the people around you, not the person who's deceased. What works for you? Because that's not going to be what works for everyone else."

Lack of Awareness or Barriers to Institutional Support

The final theme related to the fallout from the death was a general lack of awareness of support mechanisms available to bereaved students, let alone those grieving the death of a parent. In addition to not knowing ways to seek help, some participants described challenges in navigating the support infrastructure on their home campus. This section includes experiences

related to not knowing who to inform, not being in a place to talk about the death, and concerns about eligibility for certain benefits or services, timelines, or additional hoops to jump through.

Sometimes the lack of awareness was related to the institutional type or the student's residential status. For instance, Rae attended a large, public university that has the highest number of commuter students in the entire statewide system. Rae shared, "There's like an insane amount of students. So like, we don't really have a close relationship with like office staff to begin with. I don't even have a personalized advisor, like it's just a group." Emma was in a similar situation since she lived off-campus with her family and was only on campus for classes:

> I wasn't aware of any programs that my institution had to provide support… We had, our program had a, I forget what they called it. It was kind of like a guidance counselor that kind of was the spokesperson for our cohort and our program. They would email us updates and things like that. So if anything I would have or could have emailed her about it. I'm not sure what she could have done necessarily, but I could have reached out to her if I felt like I needed more help with anything.

Both Rae and Emma expressed not knowing who to reach out to about the death of their fathers.

The topic itself is not something that was easily discussed, especially if the participants were not yet ready to share the news. Molly described the difficulty of starting a semester days after she buried her mother:

> I think it was kind of because it happened like before school. It was an awkward timing … I think I would have had, I mean, I don't know to say this, but to be fair, it was kind of awkward to like ask for support from especially like, because I just started the semester and it's like you meet a teacher, and you're immediately like, "Hey, my mom recently

died, like just letting you know." I was like too young to not find that awkward, even though it's valid.

Rae, too, described the difficulty she had discussing her father's death:

I didn't ever really feel like there was a time, like it was right after Covid, so office hours are still very very much online. And I didn't really feel comfortable like "Hey, I'm in a Zoom call. Let's talk about my dad who just died a week ago."

Preston also experienced a level of discomfort regarding the disclosure to the institution:

I kind of kept it on the down low, because I didn't quite feel comfortable sharing it with the school, and I knew it wasn't going to affect me academically, a ton. That's why I didn't share a lot of that with the institution. I think maybe some of my professors, like, were a bit lax on my attendance, but other than that, nothing really.

Preston later realized that their lack of resources was incumbent on their disclosure: "So I didn't really get any [resources], but it's not because they didn't offer it." There also was not a clear path for Preston to volunteer this information. Molly articulated a similar frustration with her institution: "it didn't feel like there was like a straightforward way to do it without me going out of my way, which I just was not in a place to do at that time."

In retrospect, Preston and Olivia wished that they had known about resources available to them that could have assisted in their navigation of school work in the wake of their parents' death. Olivia focused specifically on academic resources like tutoring:

I wanted to like to use student services more because my grades suffered, and everything like my school career wise was being a big mess and I wish I had talked to more, you know, with student services and to higher ups that could have helped me out.

76

Preston's desired resources targeted the various processes related to their student status:

> I think I would have, like as I mentioned, acquire more resources, like talk to the school a bit more, help them understand like the scenario and what's going on. Like on a technical level, not like on an emotional like "What can you do to help me in these trying times?" way, but more of like, I want to mechanically understand all of like what I can take advantage of at the time.

Some participants were aware of resources that their campus offered, but had doubts on whether they qualified to receive them, missed the eligibility window, or experienced active resistance. Em was strapped for cash as they traveled to Atlanta and Montreal for services for their dad. They were also applying to graduate school and needed money for application fees. Em was worried that even if emergency funds were available, they were not intended for someone like them:

> I don't know if there was emergency funding, I wish I had applied for it, and not had such a complex cause I think that would have, I don't know. It's hard to explain the like, I don't wanna tap a resource that I don't know if it is for me … and am sort of convincing myself that it wasn't for me. And now, looking back, realizing, maybe, maybe that was, maybe that was a resource, as I should have been using. Also, that's a little hypothetical, because, again, I don't know that there was robust emergency funding.

Rae's barrier stemmed from her inability to discuss her father's death because it triggered a stress response which was later diagnosed as PTSD. Rae's options in her classes were limited because of this delayed notification:

> I think [I told] a majority of my professors that first semester. But like middle/endish. I was like, "Hey. I'm getting worse. Here's what happened like three months ago" and

they're like, "I wish you would have told me this sooner," and I was like "I could not talk

about it."

Fortunately for Rae, the faculty were understanding and worked to support her in the ways that

they could, despite not being able to offer an incomplete or withdrawal. Catherine's interactions

with her faculty were not as smooth; while she was able to inform her instructors in a timely

manner, one of Catherine's professors required that she send him a copy of the obituary or a

photo from the funeral. Catherine reflected on that encounter and said it "felt inappropriate to

send that, but it also felt appropriate because people lie all the time."

Resources and Support

The principal research question regarding the stories of parentally bereaved college

students was mostly addressed in the first section, as participants described what they

experienced immediately after the death of the parent and in the weeks and months that followed.

The first research sub-question was also addressed by participants: "What resources do these

parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their college experience after the loss?" This

section categorizes the formal offerings and informal assistance they received. A statement from

Em best encapsulates the various forms of institutional support:

I think it's always interesting when we talk about like institutional support. Cause

institutions are, are these big bodies, but they're also like made of people. And I don't

know that there was much in the way of formal institutional support, right? There weren't

policies that applied to me that I took care of, or that I that I used. There wasn't like a

pool of emergency funds that I felt responsible or that I felt like I was able to tap into.

You know, there, there weren't these formal like institutional things. And, on the other

hand, I had really concrete institutional support in some ways.

Support came in the forms of check-ins or adjustments from individuals at their institutions; growing closer with family, friends, and significant others; financial benefits like increased aid or grants; and access to therapy (often through the school). Some participants also identified that the motivation to finish their degree provided the boost they needed to persist.

Helpful Check-ins and Adjustments (Academic and Co-curricular)

Although there was not a centralized process to utilize, one of the most common actions taken by participants was informing at least one person, usually their instructors, about the death of their parents. Most of the time they received condolences for their losses (later on in the chapter the difference between sympathy and support is further explored). This section details the types of check-ins and adjustments that were made possible inside and outside the classroom that were beneficial to the participants and viewed favorably.

Professors were generally understanding and flexible with assignments for their courses. Olivia described her chemistry lab instructor as a "hardass," but was relieved when he provided some leniency after she notified him of her father's death:

> [My lab instructor] just reopened the exam. Like he never said anything to me directly, but through what he did, I know it was to help me. Before this happened, he wasn't doing extensions. I knew that was the type of professor he was. Him saying, "Oh, I'm reopening this test," or whatever, like, he just sent it to the whole class wide. Like, he didn't speak directly to me, but I know he was doing it for me.

Em experienced a similar latitude when they notified their professors before the start of the spring semester:

So from my faculty, I believe I got just like a "Go. We will address it when you're back, for now put it all on hold. Your life is the priority." And that was really meaningful for me … I don't believe there was any direct linking to resources.

Richard's professors were also understanding about "delaying work and postponing assignments, particularly with thesis." His philosophy professor also gave him a heads up when one of the class sessions was going to include topics related to death and dying:

She's like, "I totally understand if you don't want to talk about this." She talked about her own experience personally with like losing her father in college. So it was nice to have that support from her and have somebody who's in a position of authority with me, but also understands the exact position that I'm in.

The humanity shown in these moments was really helpful to the participants.

Some instructors were attuned to their students' performance and reached out regarding underperformance without knowing the context. While they did not alert their professor, Preston's English teacher noticed increased absences and connected with them:

And for instance, my English teacher noticed I was having a bit of issues with like attendance and things like that because it was really inconvenient time. It's like right, as I would normally be having lunch so super inconvenient. And I just, there were several times, it was my last class on Friday, and I was just like, sometimes I just don't want to go. And he'd reached out and been like, "Hey, what's going on? Why are you missing so much class?" And I was like, "Yeah, like, my dad had died. And it's really like affecting me and my attendance to class, and I have a huge lack of motivation." He was like, "Alright, that's fine. Don't worry about your attendance grade. I'll lock you at like a B+

80

for attendance, and you just focus on the work. And as long as you do well in the work,

I'm not going to care about your attendance." And I'm pretty good at doing work.

Catherine had a similar experience with her advisors who were also her instructors. They knew

her fairly well and shared their concern:

> I don't know how they could tell that there was something wrong. But there would be
>
> emails sent to me like "what's going on?" I was just like, "what are you talking about?"
>
> And they were like "well… all your grades."

This noticing was the reality check that Catherine needed to return her focus to her academic

performance. She mentioned that their reactive outreach made all the difference.

Participants shared that their instructors merely knowing about their situation helped to

lessen stress around their coursework. Richard was realistic in his expectations regarding

teachers' flexibility, but he stressed the importance of taking this circumstance into consideration

when grading:

> How do you, how do you curve a grade for death of a parent? That's a little, it's just a
>
> little, even funny. It's almost like a dark joke, you know, like what how many grades up
>
> does that bump up somebody's assignment? But making sure that professors are
>
> evaluating work with that in mind.

Whereas most professors took this information at face value from participants, one of

Catherine's professors required her to submit her father's obituary or a photo from the funeral.

While that one scenario contrasts with the other participants' experiences, Catherine had

a much easier time discussing the topic with her on-campus job supervisors who were staff

members:

I definitely think I had a better experience with the staff versus the faculty. Just as the faculty like, didn't really know me as a student versus like staff members that I worked with every day were like, more like, "Okay, what is going on? We need to talk." And there was just very much more check-ins from the staff.

Em has a similar experience with their Residence Life supervisor, who absorbed the resident assistant training sessions Em was scheduled to deliver and just said "Go, return when you need." Olivia said that her therapist from the counseling center kept tabs on her and that made her feel seen and validated:

[My counselor] helped me out a lot, and she was calling every day to check on me, because this was towards the end … um yeah, it was in April. So you know, school was winding down, and we're getting out for the summer. But she still called me and checked up on me.

These seemingly small outreaches were helpful for some participants and prevented them from feeling more isolated and lost. Even though most of this outreach was superficial and did not include referrals to other resources, they validated students in their times of need.

Growing Closer to Family, Friends, and Significant Others

A tragic event can bring people together. Strengthened bonds with family, friends, and significant others was another theme that emerged when participants were asked to identify sources of support. This section describes how participants grew closer to their loved ones as they grieved the loss of their parents and sought support from people who understood them.

Lei's (21, junior, Filipino, female, Seventh Day Adventist, small private college) mother died unexpectedly after having a heart attack overnight. She lived with her family adjacent to campus since her father was a faculty member. Her parents were both well-known and well-

respected in the community, and there was near-immediate support from family friends, most of whom also lived near the campus. The campus community pulled together to assist Lei and her family: "Since my father works in the school they also prayed for us here, and during the wake of my mom, like they helped out with the nightly programs. And the program during the burial." Olivia, too, was grateful for "good people around me that, you know, were trying to help me out." Friends invited her out more often and her extended family brought food to the house to make sure that she and her brother were taken care of. Rae also spoke about her close friends who provided support as they walked along with her:

> I've got really lucky with the group of people in my life. My "core four" of friends, as I like to call them, they were actually with me on a trip the week that I was about to go home for my dad dying. So they like, heard the phone calls and were like, they're processing it with me. And most of my friends met my dad, too. So he just … they kind of mourned with me. So it was just kind of nice to have them around.

Most participants had well-established relationships, but Preston was in their first couple weeks on campus when their father died. Preston shared that they did not seek out involvement opportunities when they got to campus because they wanted to get a lay of the land and be solid in their academic performance. They got along with their roommate and connected with two other gamers online before arriving to campus:

> So I, at that point, had, um, I'm not a very social person. I had about four friends total at that point at college, and one of them being my roommate and 2 other friends that would just hang out in our room all the time, and I think I grew kind of closer to my roommate. And I'm, I'm not big on crying a lot, but sometimes when it's two in the morning, and I'm really tired, and I'm like "Oh …," you know, it kind of hits, and I think he and I grew

kind of close because of that … and my friends all sort of understood, and you know,

worked around it. And we were kind of at the point where, like we grew closer because

we were sort of joking about it, because that's how my family copes a lot of the time.

Even though they did not have a wide network, Preston had a small group of friends to whom

they opened up to and their connections deepened as a result.

In addition to friends and family, two participants described the critical role their

significant others played in the processing of their parents' deaths. The death of Em's father

meant that they now shared a unique similarity to their partner:

I think I had invaluable support from my partner. His mother had committed suicide

when he was in college. And being able to talk to someone who knew what it was to lose

a parent, was really really critical for me getting through those first couple of weeks. And

frankly, the year and a half that followed.

Catherine shared that she was initially attracted to her boyfriend (now fiancé) because he

reminded her of her father, with whom she was very close. She mentioned that they both had a

similar personality even though her fiancé never met her father. She often turned to him to

process the loss of her father: "I confide a lot in my fiancé to like talk to, which is, I'm not

trauma dumping. I'm just talking to him."

Financial Aid or Institutional Financial Support

The death of a parent can deal a significant blow to students' abilities to pay for school

and other expenses. This impact can be more acutely felt if the deceased parent was the primary

breadwinner or the principal source for tuition. This section includes ways that participants

sought or received financial support from their institutions.

Most participants availed themselves of an appeal to financial aid due to the change in circumstances with their family. The process was usually fairly straightforward and easy to navigate, although Rae had to re-appeal since the office was using documents as if her father was still alive. Molly was quick to submit her appeal because she was worried about paying for school since her mother was the primary earner:

> They gave me a much better financial aid package. I don't, I wouldn't call it like generous or anything, because, like, I think I did deserve to pay like way less. But like, I remember being like, okay, phew, now I'm not like as stressed about financial situation as I was before.

Em was in a similar situation because their father covered their entire tuition. Em was focused on the funeral and missed the deadline to pay the bill with financial aid:

> I remember sitting down in financial aid and talking to them, just tears welling up in my eyes about the fact that I had missed a deadline. But I had missed my deadline because my father was dead, and I really needed them to come in clutch for me and not charge a late fee for tuition.

The late fee was waived and Em was grateful for the flexibility, whether it was in line with policy or not.

While financial aid adjustments are more commonplace in the wake of a major life event like the death of a parent, two participants spoke of how their institutions went out of their way to support them by alleviating major financial burdens. It should be noted that both of the institutions that provided such extraordinary support are small liberal arts colleges with similar limited institutional endowments.

The pandemic lockdown began three months after Em's father died. Much like other campuses nationwide, Em's institution went fully remote after spring break. Em was at an impasse: "my options were stay on campus or go sleep in the bed my father died in, and those, neither of those were options." They reached out to their dean of students and were able to get an exception that allowed them to be the only student remaining on campus. During this time, Em absorbed responsibilities for college staff who were furloughed as a result of the lockdown. Em shared that "access to housing really made such a world of difference."

Richard's financial situation was similar; he received modest financial aid from his institution and his father would cover the rest of his tuition bill. When his father died in the spring of his senior year, Richard was not sure how he was going to cover his outstanding bill with student accounts:

> We knew he was going to pay it, but he's not here. So the school stepped in, and like paid
> the remainder of my tuition, which was a massive, huge lift of like a burden on my
> family, like, I think my mom started crying when she found out. I couldn't believe it. So
> that was a huge amount of support from the school.

While these two circumstances are outliers, it is important to demonstrate the choices some institutions make in efforts to support their students following the death of a parent.

Benefits of Therapy

Numerous participants mentioned benefiting from therapeutic counseling that was often provided through their institutions. Some participants had existing relationships with counselors because of prior events or because they sought help due to their parents' prolonged illnesses, but regardless of the starting point, participants spoke to how this relationship helped them to navigate the death of their parents.

86

Catherine had a long history with a therapist since her adolescence and was able to resume sessions with her counselor because she "started to develop a slow eating disorder." Richard was incredibly grateful for the support he received from Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): "Oh, therapy! How could I forget? Therapy was huge. Therapy was really huge, but my person in CAPS was amazing during this time." Richard described the relationship as such:

> He played a massive role in making sure that I had a space to decompress, talk about how I was feeling, work through just the emotional difficulty of losing a parent in college and working through trying to deal with those emotions at the same time, and just being overwhelmed by the other things I brought from therapy, my responsibilities in school, challenges in my social life or my personal life, et cetera.

Emma also came to the realization that she could benefit from therapy: "I didn't think I needed it until I did. Because I learned after the fact that the more you do it, the easier it becomes, and it becomes like a habit." Her only regret is that she did not start counseling sooner. Like Emma, Em's father died after a prolonged illness years after a terminal diagnosis:

> I wish I had taken advantage of CAPS earlier. I know that that's a little bit of a regret that I have as I look back. Only going in in those last couple months once it was more certain that he was passing cause … My father was diagnosed when I was in high school, so, like my father, was passively dying, right, my father was actively ill for my entire college career, and then, I think, for, like the last half of junior year became a little bit more like now we're now we're staving off. And I really, I really wish I had been in therapy.

Preston shared a similar regret about delaying scheduling their initial intake for grief therapy: "My mother had been telling me to do that for a while, but I had just kind of put it off because I didn't want to deal with the setup and stuff like that."

Motivation to Graduate or Continue Schooling

Some participants experienced barriers to continuing their education as a result of their parent's death. On the other hand, some participants were able to use the death event as motivation to finish their coursework and even continue on to graduate school. The rationale most often provided was that finishing is what their late parent would have wanted or that they wanted to make their parents proud by graduating.

Catherine's father did not attend college and a bachelor's degree was a dream he had for his daughter. Catherine was aware of this goal and embraced it. When her father died, she used his goal as motivation to finish:

> We need to remember: I am a first-generation college student, first-generation American born, child born in America because my mom came from Argentina. But my dad had always told me that, like, regardless of anything, like anything happens. He would want me to continue and finish strong versus dropping out of college. So I kept going. I got my grades back up and I graduated … I think everything that I have done academic-wise after he passed away, was truly for him.

Emma, who was also a child of immigrants, held a college degree in high esteem; however, it was the mere proximity to finishing her degree that motivated her:

> Because it was at the end, I just wanted to finish and be done with it. The feeling was definitely that there are a lot of things that are more important than school, and then I did

want to take a break. But I also, I was again, it was like my fourth year. I wanted to …

just I put in so much work up until then that I just wanted to finish it.

Gianna was also a first-generation college student and her father was so proud of his daughter as she entered her final semester of school. She mentioned that in addition to grieving her father, she grieved his absence from major life events, too:

> I remember talking to him once in the hospital, and he was saying that, like he was gonna fight and be there so like, it was really hard not having him there, but in a way like it also kind of like motivates me. Like now I'm in a master's program; I'm in grad school now … my dad would always say, like, how proud of me he was for this and everything, and so that I just wanna, like, it just pushes me to keep going, because if I just decided to not, and just was like, "oh, I'm not going to grad school and not doing this" like I know my dad would like be so mad with me. I can just hear him my head like. That's like the reason why I just keep going for him, just so, you know, like because I want to just make him proud.

Richard, who was also in his final semester, shared similar sentiments and used the term "robbed" to describe his feelings of not having his father present at his graduation:

> I'm now in a huge transition, and this is a time of my life where it would have been really nice to have my dad around. It was already rough enough to not have them around for graduation. Because that was a big deal to me. See for him, for him to see me graduate, but also now not paying, not being like "Oh, this is my new job or this is my new apartment, like what like your investment in me, and like your attempts to try and rectify our relationship and be a better father or like, it's paying off in my life. Now you get to see the fruit of the work you've done to be a better father." And yeah, you know, he

never got the chance to see that fulfilled. I never got the chance to really fully thank him

for that. So I think that's something I grapple with, and I think now that that puts, I think

I put pressure on myself to make it feel as if yeah, it was all worth it for him.

Gianna and Richard both wanted to make their fathers proud and finished their programs to

honor them.

What Students Wish They Had

The previous sections of this chapter addressed the stories of parentally bereaved college

students and the resources they used to navigate their loss. The second research sub-question,

"How do colleges and universities respond to the needs of parentally bereaved college students?"

is answered from the student participants' perspectives in this final section. The second interview

included a question: "What resources or support, if any, were lacking that you wish you had

access to?" There was strong resonance across participants in three major areas: a desire to

connect to peers experiencing similar situations; a centralized notification system with

coordinated response; and clearer processes for incompletes, leaves, and re-entry.

Desire to Connect to Peers in Similar Situations

Support from friends and family was explored earlier in the chapter and while those

relationships can help soften the blow of a death loss, it is sometimes difficult to describe what it

is like when someone else has not yet experienced the event. Molly described this gap between

her and her friends: "It was sometimes hard to relate to them, because, I'm worried about the

funeral plans, and you're worried about this outfit. Not to say that I'm not also worried about the

outfit, but like it was just very different." This gulf between people who did not fully

comprehend was expressed in some way by eight of the 10 participants. Most articulated the

desire to connect with other students who have experienced loss, especially those who were also parentally bereaved.

Em experienced something similar. They described stepping out of class to take a phone call when they learned that their father was moving into hospice care. They recalled looking back into the classroom "and just feeling like, "Oh, shit … Nobody else in that room is gonna have to do this." This is not something that anyone in my peer network knows." Em soon came to learn, though, that their previously conceived isolation was not as rare:

> Something that surprised me was the amount of people who, as I sort of told people, who reached out more like, "Hey. I'm really sorry that you've joined us, but welcome to the club." And it was people that I before didn't have real relationships with, but that I developed relationships with because we had this shared really difficult thing.

Catherine had a friend group from home where all the members lost their fathers at an earlier age. She turned to them to process: "I talked to my friends who had the similar thing, or like same situation happen, and we just all kind of like talked in like a healing circle, kind of thing." Lei's training as a nurse made her aware of helpful strategies following a loss: "So because of that I joined groups, online groups… where I can say what I need to say, I can express myself. I also talked to my friends."

Whereas Em and Catherine had organic connections, they expressed interest in more formal processes, as did other participants. Em expounded, "I wish that was a little bit more formalized cause I think there's a world where I didn't get outreach from those people, and the isolation just stayed isolating." Ideas coalesced around a support group of some sort. Molly recognized the logistical and privacy concerns, but still opined, "I think that would have honestly been super helpful and just had someone close to me, physically and like in age that was going

91

through a similar situation." Emma described wanting a connection with "someone that understands because many people will not understand what you're going through. And then when someone does, you feel seen, you feel validated."

Gianna proposed a range of frequency for the meetings, "even if it was like once a month, or like some certain event or something, because I feel like I definitely would have gone." Richard envisioned a completely voluntary process because "you're not trying to put extra labor on these students. It's just to provide a sense of community, not too organized. Just let the students have the chance to talk to people who've been in a similar situation." Rae suggested that counseling services offer specific support groups for parentally bereaved students much like group offerings for depression or alcohol issues. Gianna proposed this group taking the form of a registered organization for grieving students because "they have clubs for, like literally almost everything, I feel like just something related to that … you would eventually get people to join. It might be slow at first, but I feel like over time people would join."

When these communities were not readily available on-campus, participants looked online. Even though Olivia's campus counseling center offered group grief therapy, there was only one timeslot and it conflicted with her course schedule. She wished that staffing was expanded to allow for these sessions to be offered during student-friendly times. Olivia was able to connect with peers through the Actively Moving Forward (AMF) app. Other participants, like Rae, found support in virtual settings facilitated by social media sites:

> I joined the little Dead Dad Club thing. I saw TikTok about it and honestly, it has been very nice to just hear other people's stories and like grieving, and how it's impacted their lives. I, I don't know if there's anything like that in real life out here. I did end up trying to find some bereavement support groups, and it all kind of seemed like for widows, not

92

really for kids or people who got their parents lost, and I actually have a few friends who

lost their dads pretty young, too, so just every Father's Day or my dad's birthday we all

kind of reach out to each other. Yeah, it's pretty nice.

Ideally, participants were looking to find what Richard described as "a sense of community in

that time where it's not people just having sympathy, but people have empathy for you because

they fully understand what you're going through or at least understand a little bit more."

Centralized Notification and Coordinated Response

A common thread in the interviews was information sharing that was often limited to the

participants' instructors and maybe their supervisor for their on-campus job. Save for one

participant (Em), all others shared that they were not sure who or how to notify their institution.

Even if they told their professors, there was not coordinated outreach or referral to support,

beyond the initial expression of condolences and sympathy. This section explores the want for

support beyond empathy through a centralized notification system and coordinated, intentional

support.

All participants shared that they notified at least one of their instructors about their

parents' death and received a sympathetic response, but that message was not accompanied with

a referral or connection to resources. The information just sat with the professor. Rae reflected

on the experience: "The people I told were super empathetic. It felt like, "I'm sad for you, but I

don't know if there's anything I could do." A lot of empathy, very little action, I would say."

Richard also expected more from his institution's administration:

I think a lot of it was kind of just individual. Just "sorry this happened," or like maybe

like talking to [the president] in the meeting, and be like, "Oh, sorry for your loss," and

like, et cetera. But it was like condolences, I guess, versus support.

Molly, too, was unsure of how her news landed with her faculty, or if it even mattered:

> And then I remember, like the teachers that I did let know, for whatever reason, it was
>
> kind of like "Oh, like I'm sorry, like, I know this is hard. Let me know if you need
>
> anything." I don't know if them knowing had any influence on how they treated me later
>
> in the class. Because, yeah, I don't know if that was something they kept in mind or not.

Even when she attended counseling, Gianna felt unresolved: "The therapist was nice, but I don't really feel like I got a lot out of it. And she didn't really provide me with any additional resources or support, or anything." Individuals' words expressed their care, but when it came to actions, participants were left disappointed.

A few participants described their want to make the report to one entity so they did not have to keep retelling their story. Richard shared that "it's really uncomfortable to just say over and over, yeah, like my father's dead, or like my father passed away." Richard detailed a communication plan that would ease his discomfort by taking the burden of him informing everyone:

> It was reliant on me reaching out to let them know about what's going on as opposed to
>
> just having, okay, I tell one person and they know the major networks I have. They write
>
> up, it doesn't even have to be like a very detailed email, it can be like dear so-and-so,
>
> [Richard's] father's passed away. Keep this in mind as maybe he reaches out for help, et
>
> cetera."

Molly proposed a nearly identical process for streamlined notification that helped with the heavy lifting regarding her mother's death:

> I guess it would be cool, if there was a way for, the school to get in touch with my
>
> professors, or to like, have been so on top of my case that they knew that I'd be starting

this semester in 2 weeks, and like took the time to call all my professors and tell them so I

wouldn't have to do that … where other people would do the hard conversations for me.

And I just had to do it once with one person instead of like with all five with my teachers

or something.

Rae discussed how she wished that resources for parentally bereaved students were more visible

and accessible:

I just wish there was something that was more prevalent on the school site to show like,

"Hey, if you do lose a parent, here are some resources that you could take," like if I

Googled "[institution name] I've lost a parent" like that would have been nice if there

were some resources … Because no one really knows what to do after you lose a parent,

and like having some sort of guideline of at least what to do academically for help would

be very nice.

A centralized process could have bypassed or lessened the retraumatization Catherine

experienced when one of her professors asked for verification:

From the institution standpoint, with classes and everything, it was kind of like there

wasn't support, there was just more of like "Oh, I need you to confirm that your dad

passed away by sending a picture of his obituary or his funeral," and I think that just

brought back like a whole wave of emotions just having to send all of that to a professor.

A one-stop shop of sorts has the potential to lessen the administrative burden for the students to

allow them to focus their energies on their grief or their school work and not having to navigate

the tangled and confusing bureaucracy of higher education institutions.

Participants also detailed how continued outreach through a coordinated response could

have improved their experience. This coordinated response goes beyond the initial sympathy and

extends to prolonged support. Richard noted that "there wasn't really, I think anybody, on like, mostly again, an administrative level walking me through any part of that." Em, because they were knowledgeable about campus support structures because of their residential life role, stated that they "activated the CARE team" when they sent emails to faculty, staff, and peers the night their father died. Em reflected on the individual support they received, but also shared how they expected more and could have benefited from continued support:

> I, like, my supervisors knew. Not all of my faculty by far, but the faculty that I was closer to knew. And I think they did incredible amounts of like one-to-one support. And that's really meaningful. And we've talked about like how critical that was for me getting through, and I do sometimes wish that they had more explicitly tried to connect me to resources on my campus or off of it, right, like I don't know. I can take some of the responsibility for not reaching out to CAPS earlier. And I don't know if I, if all of that sits with me, right? Was there a responsibility that supervisors or faculty or peers had to, to try and connect me to that … encouraging staff and faculty to more explicitly connect students to resources.

Catherine shared a similar suggestion regarding a CARE officer that she wished she had access to during her undergraduate career: "I definitely think that if they did have some kind of CARE team or something to go check on students who go through something that I would never wish my future kids to go through." Not surprisingly, both Em and Catherine now work in student affairs, supporting students through their individual challenge points and hurdles. Em added one caveat about the continued outreach needed for grief-work:

> I think it's a through line for many people when they lose someone, is like you get a lot of outreach or connection in that first, like week to two weeks, maybe that first month.

96

But grief doesn't stop then, right, like or at minimum, it didn't for me. I still needed

resources six months, a year on.

The longer arc of continued outreach is important to consider as grief is typically not resolved in

a predetermined amount of time.

Clearer Processes or Greater Flexibility for Incompletes, Leaves, and Reentry

Participants described a lot of unknowns and uncertainties following the deaths of their

parents. The confusion often centered around students unsure about academic policies like partial

withdrawals, course incompletes, or leaves: "Is this an option?" "Am I eligible?" "What does this

mean?" This section provides a summary of the processes participants wish they had access to or

had taken advantage of in the wake of the parents' deaths.

Olivia wished that she had reached out to her instructors sooner. By the time she notified

them about the situation of her father's illness and eventual death, it was too late and she was

unable to withdraw:

I probably would go back and talk to my professors … probably talked to them a little bit

earlier, like when he first had that stroke and was in the hospital, instead of waiting until,

you know, he passed away, and just see if I could do an Incomplete for those classes,

because I didn't know doing an Incomplete was a thing instead of failing or withdrawing,

or by that time it was too late to withdraw, but you can take an Incomplete and catch up

later. I definitely would have done that instead of just giving up.

Course incompletes may have helped Olivia salvage her grades for the term instead of just

showing up for final exams unprepared and still in a grief-induced daze. Em found themselves in

a similar quandary when considering their options in the final semester of their undergraduate

career:

I do wish there were more formal policies to allow folks to take time away, and it and it

not be as much of a of an issue to come back. You know, I, one of my faculty at one point

asked me like, "Hey, should you take time?" Should I take time away from the college?

And I considered it. But the reapplication process frankly scared the shit out of me … I

think lessening barriers to re-entry feels important.

Clearly articulated policies (and faculty or staff who understand them) would have been helpful

for the participants who desired to know more about their options.

Emma was able to get extensions on her final papers during the summer term, but she

wished she had some form of exemption due to her father's death: "I wish I could have not done

my assignments, not because I felt like I did a poor performance on them. Anyways, I wish my

grade could have been calibrated in a sense that they didn't count." Richard shared a similar

sentiment, at least in terms of faculty leniency:

Obviously, professors, all students are going through challenges that professors don't

know. That's something that already exists, but the death of a parent is a unique

experience where it starts to come out, like people are gonna know, everyone knows. So

now, you're in a position where you do know about something that's affecting the

student. How are you gonna react to that?

While they were not seeking an incomplete or withdrawal, Preston wanted more flexibility on

class attendance:

I think the biggest thing is just having a system to like, like the biggest thing for me was

attendance. If the institution is able to waive like either like a few extra days, or like five

or six days of absence in every class like that alone; it would be monumental. And I've

talked to some people who have been in similar scenarios, and they agree that like

98

attendance is a really, really big thing, and it's a lot more pressure and a lot, you, I was

having a lot of anxiety because of the pressure around attendance and the grade for it, that

I wish I hadn't had.

Oftentimes the adjustments or accommodations were granted by each individual professor and the range of flexibility varied. There is a lot at stake when it comes to academics. Policies that permit some latitude can make all the difference for students grieving the death of a parent.

Emerging Themes: Interplay of Identities

Kessler (2019) stated that "each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed" (p. 29). To that end, this study aimed to widen the narratives included in death research by intentionally recruiting diverse participants and asking them to provide their salient identities instead of making them choose from a list. The non-majority identities represented by the participants in this study are perspectives that have traditionally been minimized because they exist at the margins—of society and of research. While these narratives were not shared at the same frequency or as cleanly as the previously identified findings, they are intentionally included here to amplify the voices of historically oppressed populations and how they grieve. Table 3 includes one exemplifying quote to capture the uniqueness of each participants' lived experience.

Table 3. Exemplifying Quotes

Name (Pronouns)	Exemplifying Quote
Olivia (she/her)	"Looking back on it, I really should have taken time off and just withdrew and took the time because my grades did suffer and my GPA did suffer."
Gianna (she/her)	"It just pushes me to keep going, because if I just decided to not, and just was like, "oh, I'm not going to grad school and not doing this" I know my dad would be so mad with me. I can just hear him my head. That's the reason why I just keep going for him, just so, you know, like because I want to just make him proud."
Emma (she/her)	"Try to connect with people who went through similar situations because it's really helpful. Just that connection of someone that understands because many people will not understand what you're going through. And then when someone does, you feel seen, you feel validated."
Molly (she/her)	"It was sometimes hard to relate to them, because, like, I'm worried about the funeral plans, and you're worried about this outfit. Not to say that I'm not also worried about the outfit, but like it was just very different."
Em (they/them)	"So I stepped out of the classroom and we had this conversation, and I remember looking in and just feeling like, "Oh, shit... Nobody else in that room is gonna have to do this; like this is not something that anyone in my peer network knows." And I was wrong... thankfully. Right? I mean, not thankfully right. I'm not glad other people's parents were dead, but you know... I'm glad the isolation was not as complete as I thought it was. But it was an intensely isolating experience because a lot of my friends and people in my network didn't know how to deal with it. They didn't know how to talk to me and I didn't know how to ask for what I needed. So a lot of those relationships fell by the wayside. Something that surprised me was the amount of people who, as I sort of told people, who reached out more like, "Hey. I'm really sorry that you've joined us, but welcome to the club." And it was people that I before didn't have real relationships with, but that I developed relationships with because we had this shared really difficult thing."
Preston (they/them)	"I was talking a bit with my uncle, who my mother and her brother had lost their father when he was like my age, and she was like 12, and I was talking to him, and we were realizing that a lot of the grief that both of us have experienced was not based in, it didn't have like an actualization. It didn't come out in like a loss of priorities or like it didn't interfere with our normal lives, like we kept going with our normal lives as if nothing happened. But now we were also just worried about our mother all the time. So I think, like priorities wise, nothing changed. You know whether or not that's a good thing is up for debate. But it was mostly, just it mostly just came out in, you know, if I was overly emotional, well, I would think about that a lot about my mother, and like whether or not she's doing okay and what not. That was most of my grief."

Name (Pronouns)	Exemplifying Quote
Lei (she/her)	"Even before my mom died, like, I'm very well aware of what it means. I mean, I don't really understand. But I'm aware of, like, what do you call this, how this like what you need to do in order to, in order to improve after a loved one died. Because of nursing, I learned those things. And then so because of that, I joined groups, online groups... where I can say what I need to say, I can express myself. And yeah. And then I also talk to my friends. I talk to friends and to strangers, and I do journaling. And I watch funny movies. Funny movies and funny, like, memes. And I also go out in nature and to help with my mental health."
Rae (she/her)	"My dad did end up passing away because of Covid, so the pandemic tied a lot into my loss as a whole. And yeah, just having to move back home after moving out for college. I am a grade ahead, so technically, I moved out at 17 years old, as a minor. So it just I feel like I've had to grow up in a lot of unprecedented situations that not normally people have to go through. I'm also a first-generation student. So just throw that into the mix."
Richard (he/him)	"I'm now in a huge transition, and this is a time of my life where it would have been really nice to have my dad around. It was already rough enough to not have him around for graduation. Because that was a big deal to me. See for him to see me graduate, but also now not paying, not being like "Oh, this is my new job or this is my new apartment, like what like your investment in me, and like your attempts to try and rectify our relationship and be a better father or like, it's paying off in my life. Now you get to see the fruit of the work you've done to be a better father." And yeah, you know, he never got the chance to see that fulfilled. I never got the chance to really fully thank him for that. So I think that's something I grapple with, and I think now that that puts, I think I put pressure on myself to make it feel as if yeah, it was all worth it for him."
Catherine (she/her)	"I would have probably wanted to maybe be a little less selfish and be there for my other family members who are also grieving and kind of understand that like it's not just me who's way through these feelings. It's... somebody lost their brother, somebody lost their son, like there was so much more happening that I could have paid more attention to."

Religion

Three participants mentioned religion or faith practices in their interviews, but in different ways and varying degrees. Emma turned to her church community who supported her and her family during her father's illness and death: "I leaned heavily into my faith. I think that's one of the main reasons why I'm doing good." Gianna, who was raised Catholic, also relied on her religious practice, but the experience introduced doubt:

When my dad was sick sometimes my mom and I and my sister we would go to church like more than we were before that. But I don't know, I don't really think that going to church like makes you religious, or it makes you more religious than like, if you don't. I just feel that like sometimes I would try to like, pray more or just talk to God in my head and stuff, because, I do believe in God. But then that whole thing makes me so frustrated, like, you know, if there is God, why would he do this, and then that whole religion thing comes into play, you know, like we prayed so much … I just don't understand that stuff like that happens.

Richard's experience was religion was different since his interaction was more ritualistic as he traveled back to Nigeria for his Muslim father's 40-day service. Since he was raised Christian by his mother, Richard looked for ways to educate himself on Islamic funerals, as he was only ever peripherally exposed to Islam:

I had exposure to Islam, but I never attended an Islamic funeral, nor knowing funeral rites, or how to properly proceed after somebody passes. So I wish I reached out to whatever office of religious services on campus, whatever that was. I wish I reached out so I could get more guidance from an imam possibly, just to feel as if I'm doing what my father would have wanted me to do after he passed. I ended up asking a friend who was Muslim just for questions about like, "What would you usually do? Have you been in the situation?" But I think it would have been, it would have been kind of comforting to have some sort of religious authority figures like walk me through that process.

First-Generation College Student Status

The introductory interview included a question that asked participants if they were first-generation college students, meaning that they were the first in their immediate family to attend

college. This question was asked to identify participants who may not have had the social capital or knowledge about college-going. Four participants, Gianna, Catherine, Richard, and Rae, answered in the affirmative and went on to explain how they took this designation with pride and used it as a motivating factor after the deaths of their parents (see also the previous section on motivation). This fact was a point of pride for Gianna's father: "You know, I'm the first in my family to go to college so, he was always like so proud of that. And he worked really hard to put me through school." Catherine also carried this identity as a badge of honor:

> I am a first-generation college student, first-generation American born, child born in America because my mom came from Argentina. But my dad had always told me that, like, regardless of anything, like anything happens. He would want me to continue and finish strong versus dropping out of college.

While Richard's father attended college, Richard was still considered first-generation by his institution because his father lived overseas and the college combined students with first-generation or low-income indicators into one group for a support program. In addition to being the first in her family to attend college, Rae also mentioned that she skipped a grade in high school and was 17 when she started college two hours away from home: "I feel like I've had to grow up in a lot of unprecedented situations that not normally people have to go through." Being "first-gen" added another layer of complexity for students navigating college and experiencing the death loss of a parent.

Children of Immigrants

Being the first in your family to attend college shared some similarities with being the first generation born in a new country. There was some overlap between first-generation students and the five participants whose parents were immigrants (Emma, Molly, Rae, Richard,

103

Catherine), but the similarities were not always guaranteed. Molly's parents attended college in their home countries (Germany and Colombia) as did Emma's parents:

> my parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe and they're very hard working. They worked long hours, especially when I was little, so oftentimes me and my sister were taken care of by my grandma, or sometimes alone, too… but college was a drilled-in concept.

The orientation toward hard work is often associated with immigrant populations and appeared as a thread in other narratives. Rae talked about the "bootstraps" mentality held by most of her family members:

> Because my family's families are all immigrant, were all immigrants, like, I think I'm a second generation technically, so what my parents were taught is straight from Trump immigrant source, which is, you don't get help. You suffer. You figure it out by yourself, because there's no one there to help you, government wise or like medical wise because we're very poor.

Catherine's father carried his immigrant persona in a more hopeful, aspirational tone that inspired his daughter: "Part of the reason why I became an RA was because of my dad, he also wanted to leave his footprint on the world … by helping a generation kind of change their ideals."

This dimension of identity also introduced a level of separation that presented challenges for grief and bereavement. For instance, Molly's German grandmother was not able to attend funeral services due to pandemic travel restrictions. Whereas travel restrictions were eased at the time of Richard's father's death, Richard was not able to make it to Nigeria for the prompt burial

104

dictated by Islamic custom. He was able to attend the service 40 days after the death (following a nearly full day of travel), but felt excluded:

> It was like I was a part of the service, by definitely felt like an observer. And I mean, it didn't really help that like the majority of the service, I want to say, 95% was spoken in Yoruba, which is like our tribe language in Nigeria, and I mean I know a couple of words here and there. I can pick out what my mom says to me, but I'm not like fluent by any means. So that was a massive, massive barrier. Just not being able to pick up on anything. Basically sitting outside this like big tent for the service and you're there for, I mean the service itself lasts a couple of hours, and you're just hearing people talk about your father, hearing an imam talk about your father for so long, and you just barely even know what he's saying. So that was that was really tough. And yeah, I'll see like my barrier to understanding the rituals and the practices that were done. Not that I saw anything I was like. "Oh, I can't believe we did that." Nothing like that. It was more so, just like, "Well, why did we do this?" Or "what's happening now?"

Socioeconomic Status

Not surprisingly there were intersections of socioeconomic status and the identities of first-generation college students and being the children of immigrants. The death of a parent also had significant economic impact for most, if not all, participants (see previous section on financial aid and the extraordinary institutional support Em and Richard received). Outside of college financial aid, participants felt this change in different ways. Molly's mother was the primary earner in the family and "after her death, we were like lower middle class, which was also like not a thing I would have thought of before, like how much the financial realities of my

family would have changed." Molly also navigated securing new insurance because her coverage was provided by her mother's employer.

Rae's decision to return for the semester, even though she considered taking time off, was influenced by the lease she signed for her off-campus apartment:

That would have been different if I had more support, like financially I was still paying my rent by myself, because the school doesn't pay your rent for you, no matter how poor you are. But I had to work to pay my rent in a very high cost of living area and I couldn't go home as much as I wanted, because gas was like five bucks. So it always just felt like it came down to money that I didn't have, and I honestly didn't want to be paying, because I'd rather just be back home. But I already signed the lease, so we were here.

Em described feeling limited by their change in circumstances. Their father had previously covered the tuition cost, but Em no longer had access to funds to support travel to both funerals or application fees to graduate schools. As a result, Em only applied to one school with the money they had saved.

While not explicitly asked, five participants (Emma, Em, Rae, Richard, and Catherine) mentioned working jobs on and off-campus to earn money before and after the death of the parents. Em and Catherine worked as resident assistants, Richard earned money as a teaching assistant, staff member in the campus makerspace, and was compensated for his student government role. Emma worked part-time at a nursing home and Rae worked full-time at Home Depot. While these jobs provided some source of income (or financial offset), the roles occupied time and limited involvement in other campus engagement opportunities.

Political Differences

All participants described being close to their deceased parent, however that did not mean that they always got along. Preston and Rae mentioned political differences with their fathers that introduced an added layer to their relationships. Preston shared:

Towards the beginning of Covid, I started getting into politics a bit more... and he was a policeman and we kind of, we butted heads politically, and that sparked a lot of arguments too at the house, but it was always like he was willing to learn, and I was going to explain things.

Rae's relationship was father also involved conflicting political viewpoints. Rae reflected:

My parents were very much like anti-vaxxers, and did not believe in Covid. I was the only one who's vaccinated in my family. So they came home sick. I knew they probably had Covid. He went [on his business trip] anyway… Donald Trump was still President then, which seems crazy to say, but yeah, he was still in office, and a lot of just very extreme right-wing beliefs were being spread around, and I think they fell, succumbed to it, because I was talking to my dad's sister, and she was like "he was not like this before Donald Trump came into office." I was like, "Well, good to know."

College often introduces students to new ideas and they question what they have been taught at home or through the values espoused by their parents. Any differences of opinion may also influence how parentally bereaved students interpret their loss.

Gender Roles and Transitions

A majority of the participants were cisgender women (seven); however, most were non-White. Emma, Gianna, Rae, Catherine, and Molly all mentioned the emergence of a caretaker role for the loved ones. Molly mentioned this shift explicitly:

I definitely do identify with being a woman and perceive many events of my life through

like the lens of being a woman, and like how things are different for women. I think

especially with my mom dying and my sister living in Pittsburgh, I became the matriarch

of the family that was super weird.

Em connected the depression experienced during their gender transition with its intensification

following their father's death:

I think it wasn't until I was about a year into my like medical transition that I realized

how depressed I had been and how much like depression and dysphoria came together. I

just really, it's so simple, right, to like, of course, when you feel weird and bad and

anxious about your body, it's not shocking that you might feel weird, bad, and anxious

about the world.

Only one participant was a cisgender male which suggested the restrictive effects performative

masculinity has on men's grief processing. Richard acknowledged the need to address the

pressures he faced to "continue blocking and tackling" when he finally realized that he needed

help and sought the assistance of a therapist to address these high expectations.

Conclusion

This chapter described the findings from the participants' interviews that addressed the

three research questions involving the stories of parentally bereaved college students, namely

how they were impacted by the death, the resources they used to navigate their time as students

following loss, and the support they wished they had during that time. The immediate impacts

were often detrimental and included worsened academic performance and decreased motivation,

the experience of a blurred grieving process where individuals felt shock and numb, avoiding the

topic or focusing on other things, difficulty managing priorities and tasks, and a general lack of

awareness of and barriers to institutional support. The resources and support that participants found helpful were check-ins from faculty and staff, strengthened bonds with family and friends, increased financial support from their institutions, therapeutic relationships (often through their institutions' counseling services), and the motivation to finish because that is what their late parents would have wanted. Lastly, participants wished they had access to a network of peers who experienced a similar death loss, a centralized way to notify their institution and professors of their loss so they could benefit from a coordinated response, and clearer processes for course incompletes or withdrawals. These themes were situated within a global pandemic and contextualized by the salient identities of the participants. These findings will be further discussed in Chapter V, along with implications for practitioners, examinations of the limitations of this study, and areas for future research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

There's a club. The Dead Dads Club. And you can't be in it until you're in it. You can try to understand, you can sympathize. But until you feel that loss … My dad died when I was nine. George, I'm really sorry you had to join the club. - Cristina Yang, *Grey's Anatomy*

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the study: its objectives, methods, and findings. I then discuss the findings' relationship to other extant literature by comparing similarities and contrasting differences. I also identify limitations of the study and implications for practitioners, particularly in the field of student affairs. Lastly, I suggest future research possibilities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to expand understanding of the impact of the death of a parent on college students and identify patterns and support opportunities for student affairs practitioners and other helpers by building on a conceptual framework that incorporated theories related to grief and loss with a student development lens. This study aimed to explore how students from a variety of backgrounds process parental death and how institutions of higher education can best support them during and through that process. Considering the context of the individualized experience and the institutional response, the following research questions framed the qualitative study.

1) *What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are enrolled in college?*

   a) What resources do these parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their college experience after the loss?

b) How do colleges and universities respond to the needs of parentally bereaved

college students?

Summary of Findings

The study had 10 participants who experienced the death of a parent during their

undergraduate college career. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 23 and included

seven cisgender women, two non-binary people, and one cisgender man. The pool included a

variety of identities (described as salient by participants) across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic

categories where first-generation college students and children of immigrants were represented.

All but one of the participants (Lei) completed two interviews.

The analysis of interviews yielded themes in three categories: (a) the immediate impact

of the death loss (often negative); (b) the resources and support participants took advantage of;

and (c) the services and support to which students wish they had access. These themes existed in

the milieu of compounding crises of a death loss during a global pandemic and considered the

influence of participants' identities. A summary of themes is detailed below. A full listing of

themes and their frequency can be found in Appendix F.

Immediate Impact of the Death

The immediate impacts of parental death loss often had negative effects. Participants

reported decreased motivation that led to worsened academic performance (Olivia, Em, Preston,

Lei, Rae, Richard, and Catherine). There were also emotional responses that caused participants

to feel shocked and numb, and these feelings were accompanied by a blurred grieving process

where some participants were unable to remember specific events (Gianna, Emma, Rae, and

Catherine). Sometimes participants, in order to avoid attending to their grief, focused on other

things like academics or sought distractions through their social networks or alcohol (Gianna,

Molly, Em, and Richard). Participants reported difficulty balancing priorities and tasks related to school work and social engagement while also attending to their grief (Olivia, Em, Richard, and Catherine). Lastly, participants had a general lack of awareness of support from their respective institutions regarding resources (i.e., who to tell or talk to about their loss) and policies that may have benefited their academic status (i.e., leaves of absence, course incompletes) (Emma, Molly, Em, Preston, and Rae).

Resources and Support

While the impact of the death had costly effects, all participants were able to identify sources of resources and support that they found helpful. When participants shared the news of their parent's death the information was greeted with sympathy. Faculty members also made individual adjustments like increased absence allowances or extensions on assignments and staff members offered support and adjusted work-study schedules as needed for student employees (Olivia, Emma, Em, Preston, Richard, and Catherine). Participants also reported closer connections with family, friends, and significant others and leaned on those strengthened bonds (Olivia, Gianna, Preston, Lei, Rae, Richard, and Catherine). Participants benefited from increased monetary support from their institutions either through adjusted financial aid packages or forgiveness of outstanding account balances (Molly, Em, Rae, and Richard). Institutional counseling services played a key role as participants navigated their grief (Olivia, Emma, Em, Rae, Richard, and Catherine). Participants also recalled conversations with their late parents about finishing their degree and used that aspirational goal as motivation to graduate (Gianna, Emma, Em, Richard, and Catherine).

What Students Wish They Had

Participants were asked about what resources they wish they had access to following the death of their parents. Their death losses made them feel like they were going through this experience alone and had trouble relating to friends who did not have the same experience. Eight participants articulated the desire to connect with similarly aged peers who were also navigating the death of a loved one, especially a parent (all but Preston and Lei). Participants also articulated the need for an accessible, streamlined notification process that allowed them to tell one person at their institution and the information would be disseminated to instructors and other individuals in their support network (Molly, Em, Richard, and Catherine). Ideally that notification would also trigger a coordinated, scaffolded response protocol with multiple checkpoints that extended beyond two weeks following the death. Similarly, the supportive outreach would direct students to clarified, centrally located bereavement policies and processes related to course incompletes and withdrawals or leaves of absence (if they exist) (Olivia, Emma, Em, and Preston).

Grief in the Context of Covid

I would be remiss if this contextual note was omitted from this summary. The study was time-bound to include deaths that occurred during three years of a global pandemic. Even if the cause of death was not directly Covid-19, all participants mentioned the influence of the virus on their experience in some form. Death loss is already a disconcerting experience independent from a world filled with uncertainty from a disease that killed millions of people. This section exists to commemorate and commend the grit and persistence of the participants as they faced loss and grief locally and globally.

Discussion

This section compares the findings from this study with the extant literature. The Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) served as the theoretical framework for the study and the findings of parentally bereaved college students aligned with the model that positions mourners as oscillating between loss and restoration orientations. Participants also described experiences following the death of their parents that mirrored the effects demonstrated by the general population of bereaved college students. The three themes that emerged from the study are compared and contrasted with the existing research. As a result of this study, the conceptual framework presented in Chapter I evolved to its current iteration. This evolution is further described in this section.

Dual Process Model

The Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) presented the bereaved individual's focus alternating between loss-oriented (attending to grief and matters related to the death, the primary stressor) and restoration-oriented (daily tasks and responsibilities, also known as secondary stressors). The authors proposed that individuals oscillate between the two orientations in a dynamic, non-linear pattern. Whereas the constant change may be intense, working toward restoration strengthens adjustment and ability to exist in the larger world beyond the loss. In the context of this study, the loss orientation was still focused on death-related matters, but the restoration orientation included responsibilities of the participants' capacities as undergraduate college students, namely academic performance and on-campus social engagement. This model captured the duality of college students as students *and* mourners.

The tension between the two orientations showed up in participants' challenge in managing tasks and priorities related to their parents' deaths and their student personas. Funeral

logistics and attending to their grief were often front and center while they tried to commit time to their school work and engagement on campus (i.e., friends, clubs, or athletic teams). Em's balancing their role as a senior RA while attending two funerals and applying to graduate school demonstrate this push and pull. Richard's management of his senior thesis and student government co-presidency while flying to Nigeria is another example. While participants reflected on their ability to try to do it all, the prevailing outcome was that nothing was done well.

Sometimes returning to the college routine was a welcome escape for the participants. Others, like Olivia, Molly, and Rae, expressed that they wished they had taken some time away to allow them to best deal with matters related to their death loss. All participants acknowledged that there was a lot going on in their lives as they tried to balance everything related to the death and funeral, their lives at home, and their on-campus responsibilities. This push and pull between the dual stressors of loss and restoration validated the Dual Process Model framework for this study and suggested that the additional layer of "undergraduate student" may introduce complications that draw additional time, energy, and resources into the pattern of oscillation.

Conceptual Framework Evolution

As I honed in on my topic about half-way through my doctoral program, the original conceptual framework was a cartoonish graphic of a graveyard that juxtaposed the shadow sides of grief (depicted by rain clouds) with the potential beneficial outcomes (represented by flowers in the cemetery). This original concept centered grief as a staged, time-bound process. That graphic soon evolved into the nested model shown in Figure 1. When this study was first conceptualized, the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) was considered as one of the grief/loss lenses. As the study advanced and data were collected, it became clear that the Dual

115

Process Model was the theoretical framework that best encapsulated the push and pull described by the participants as they addressed their grief and tried to maintain their student persona. As a result, the graphic was adjusted to promote the Dual Process Model from one of the grief/loss lenses and now encapsulates the individual and the lenses. This reorganization accentuates oscillation of the bereaved students between the loss and restoration stressors. The updated figure does a better job capturing the circuitous path parentally bereaved students navigate within the grief/loss and student development lenses, all within the context of the institution and a larger societal culture.

Effects of Grief on College Students

The principal research question was, "What are the stories of students who experience the death of a parent while they are enrolled in college?" In line with the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), participants reported challenges in navigating restoration-related areas due to the death loss of their parents.

Academic Impact

The narratives shared by Olivia, Em, Preston, Lei, Rae, Richard, and Catherine also included stories of worsened academic performance for a number of reasons, such as decreased motivation, increased absences, or lack of focus. These patterns comported with the findings of Servaty-Seib & Hamilton (2006), Cupit et al. (2016), and Plocha and Bacigalupe (2020), namely lower test scores, need for additional time to complete work, decreased participation in class, and inability to stay focused or concentrate following the death of a loved one. Similarly, Boelen et al. (2006) argued that grief has cognitive effects on bereaved college students that sounded akin to the experiences described by Catherine, Richard, Olivia, and Rae.

116

Physical Effects

Gianna, Emma, Rae, and Catherine mentioned that the weeks following the deaths of their fathers seemed like a blur, and some described visceral feelings like pits in their stomach or broken hearts. These physical manifestations of grief match well with the findings from Stroebe et al. (2007) that described the symptoms and illnesses that sometimes accompany grief. Hardison et al. (2005) also examined the physical impacts, mainly insomnia, and described symptoms similar to Preston's inability to sleep due to their constant worry about their surviving parent. These themes also tracked with the powerful and/or challenging grief reactions described in *We Get It* (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015) that included a feeling of shock or other bodily metaphors like "hit me like a ton of bricks" (p. 143).

Changes in Social Engagement

Four participants (Emma, Em, Catherine, and Molly) all experienced changes to the ways they engaged socially on campus. These differences were observed in shifts in their friend groups, which matched the changes in interpersonal relationships where friends minimized the intensity of the grief or found it tiresome, as described by Balk (2008), or changes to the clubs and organizations they affiliated with, as noted in Cousins (2008) where institutional attachment decreased for bereaved students. Sometimes these social changes were the products of avoiding the topic of death or finding other ways to distract attention, as detailed by Gianna, Molly, Em, and Richard. This behavior can be considered experiential avoidance as defined by Shear (2010). The social use of alcohol (Gianna and Richard) or dependence on it (Em) matched Cousin's (2008) findings on the role of alcohol in coping with loss. The variation in social presence to either extreme may also be related to counteracting the deeply isolating, lonely experience detailed by the narratives in Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) that identified feeling lonely

117

as a paradox: "they were surrounded by others who did not understand what they were experiencing, but at the same time they were also seeking solitude and a way to escape" (p. 18).

Contextual Influences

There were a number of similarities across the interviews; however, each participant described their grief experience in a way that was deeply personal and demonstrated that the process is non-linear (Doka, 2017; see Table 3). The participants' lived experiences were influenced by a number of factors that are also evidenced in the literature, including the nature of the death (Balk et al. 2010; Cupit et al., 2016; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008), whether it was sudden like Molly's or Lei's mothers or after a prolonged illness like Em's and Gianna's fathers, and the context of the situation (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008; Cummings, 2015), like Rae's father's death while traveling for work or Richard's father's death in Nigeria. Another influence is the resilience skills of the individual (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009; Murrell et al., 2018) that could be demonstrated in the different responses from participants who lost their parents at the end of their college careers (Em, Gianna, Emma, and Richard) versus the beginning (Preston and Molly). The participants near the end of their college careers seemed to have stronger connections to their campuses and knew of more resources, whereas the younger students (first and second year, respectively) were still figuring out the bureaucracy of their campuses.

Resources and Support

Research sub-question a asked, "What resources do these parentally bereaved college students use to navigate their college experience after the loss?" Participants were able to name sources of support that helped them to process their loss and learn to cope. Most of these resources were also reflected in literature related to bereaved college students.

Helpful Check-Ins

Six participants explicitly described check-ins from faculty or staff members that were helpful. Oftentimes these check-ins also included increased flexibility with regard to assignments or work responsibilities. The characteristics of these supportive networks underlines the importance of timely, community support (Balk, 2008; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Olivia, Emma, Em, Preston, Richard, and Catherine all informed at least one professor or staff person at their institution and reported empathetic responses received from those individuals. These kind responses emphasized the importance of staff training on supporting bereaved students encouraged by Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008). The participants described that their faculty or staff contact was able to listen and offer immediate support, but did not offer tangible support and refer them to additional resources (the other steps recommended by Servaty-Seib and Taub [2008]). This shortcoming was as labeled as "condolences versus support" by Em, Richard, and Catherine. These six participants also benefited from flexible academic obligations (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Plocha & Bacigalupe, 2020) like extended deadlines for Em's and Richard's theses, Preston's fixed participation grade, and Olivia's lab instructor reopening the online exam.

Strengthened Relationships

Seven participants reported that their relationships with family and friends grew stronger in the wake of their death loss. These enhanced bonds reflected the social adjustments featured in Balk (2008), Cousins (2008), and Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010). The nature of these relationships also shared similarities with the changing family relationships chapter in *We Get It* (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Molly, Em, and Catherine also described growing closer to

their significant other, which was also substantiated in the research on bereavement and romantic relationships (Hepworth et al., 1984; Silverman, 1987).

Counseling

The literature highlighted the benefit of counseling support in the wake of a death loss (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Varga et al., 2022). Six participants (Olivia, Emma, Em, Rae, Richard, and Catherine) shared that their engagement with therapy on their campuses was helpful in their processing and even wished they had initiated counseling sooner. Two participants, Molly and Gianna, mentioned connecting with their institutions' counseling center but reported that they did not find the interaction useful. Molly shared that her initial attempt to connect was in the early stages of Covid when the counseling center was still trying to figure things out, perhaps before the center moved to virtual practices, as suggested by Crowley (2022). Gianna's interaction was later on in the pandemic, but "didn't do anything for her." It is important to note that all participants who mentioned counseling interactions sought those connections individually and not as a result of soft outreach from the institution or referral to the office.

Another counseling-related topic from the literature appeared in some of the narratives from the study. Neimeyer et al. (2008) and Varga et al. (2022) discussed that seeking help may not be culturally accepted or promoted. Emma shared that she was initially hesitant about counseling because she thought she had everything she needed with her family and church community, but eventually started sessions when she realized she needed it. Preston discussed how grief counseling was not a thing for them, even if their mother encouraged it. Richard also alluded to how he put his masculinity aside to seek help (even before his father died.) Most notably, though, was Rae's story. Rae is the daughter of Mexican immigrants; in their culture,

counseling and any psychological prescriptions was shunned as weak since it ran counter to the gritty, immigrant narrative in her family. Despite that pressure from her family, Rae sought help and is now medicated to address her PTSD: "I got meds and they fixed my shit real quick."

Motivations

Qualitative studies are able to provide a nuanced perspective sometimes lost in quantitative research (Patton, 2002). *We Get It* (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015) included chapters themed around continuing connections and existential questions about self and future following the death loss. These two themes gave credence to the participants who used the memory of their late parents as motivation to continue their schooling and finish (and sometimes even continue on to graduate school). Gianna, Emma, Em, Richard, and Catherine also invoked the desires of their late fathers to finish school not just because they were close to the finish line, but because their dads instilled in them the importance of a college education from a young age and made sacrifices to finance their educations. To these participants, graduation was not just for them, but also for their fathers.

The concurrent narratives from *We Get It* (Sevaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015) and this study also related to the participants who changed their academic path, questioned whether or not college was worth it, or found some way to hold on to the memory of their deceased parents. Molly's mother died in the weeks leading up to her sophomore year, so she did not use the death as motivation to graduate, but added a German class to her schedule that fall semester as a way to stay connected to her immigrant mother through her mom's native language. Olivia hopes to eventually work for NASA to honor her father's love of science and science fiction, interests she also enjoys. Preston's father loved card games and Preston took their dad's cribbage board back

121

to campus with them following the funeral. These are all demonstrations of maintaining

connections with their late parents.

Financial Aid

One beneficial theme, adjusted financial aid or direct assistance from the institution, was

not mentioned explicitly in the literature for parentally bereaved students. Participants who

sought financial aid adjustments, on the whole, saw packages calibrated to meet their changed

circumstances. Em and Richard both benefited from their institution's ability to provide

extraordinary support that might not be the norm elsewhere. Em was permitted to stay on-

campus after the shutdown and Richard's institution forgave the remaining balance for his final

semester. It is notable that the schools that made these adjustments were both small Quaker

colleges known for making decisions rooted in their values.

What Was Missing

The second interview included questions about what resources participants wish they had

in pursuit of the research sub-question b: "How do colleges and universities respond to the needs

of parentally bereaved college students?" Participants articulated supports that would have

helped them to navigate their death loss more smoothly. The recommended mechanisms shared

similarities with literature related to bereaved college students.

Peer Support

A group setting can help normalize an incredibly isolating experience like grief (Battle et

al., 2013; Vickio, 2008), especially within compassionate spaces (Dobson et al., 2020). Servaty-

Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) also identified the importance of connecting with grieving peers as

one of their themes. The desire to connect with similarly aged peers who experienced a death

loss in general, but especially those who are parentally bereaved, was mentioned explicitly by all

but two participants in this study (Lei and Preston). The suggested formats varied from being a function of an administrative office staffed by professionals, as suggested by Molly and Richard, to Gianna's proposal for a student-run club that meets regularly. It is important that these groups are offered at a time that students can attend (Vickio, 2008) as not to replicate Olivia's inability to attend the counseling office's grief group since it was offered at a time that conflicted with class.

When these options did not exist on campus, participants looked elsewhere, often online. Participants identified two virtual outlets: the AMF (Actively Moving Forward) app (not surprising as one of the recruitment methods for the study was through HealGrief, the organization that operates the app) and the Dead Dads Club Facebook group. While they are not billed as counseling options, per se, these online connections met the individuals' needs to find others navigating a similar experience.

Streamlined and Continued Outreach

Participants also articulated the desire to have a centralized reporting system for their death loss that triggered a notification to faculty and staff and enabled continued outreach and support. It seemed as if the information stayed with the faculty or staff member who received the news and was not shared with others in the students' support networks. This information hoarding may have resulted from a general awkwardness around death (Straker, 2013; Willer et al., 2020) or the larger institutional ill-preparedness regarding this type of information (Streufert, 2004). Balk (2008) argued the importance of timely intervention and support. Whether the support (Schlossberg, 2008) came from faculty, staff, or paraprofessionals (i.e., resident assistants; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008), the counseling center (Vickio, 2008) or a campus bereavement center (Balk, 2001), additional support was wanted by the participants beyond the

initial sympathy expressed. Ideally, the process would be highly visible and easy to navigate, as suggested by Rae, and help to lessen the load of telling the same story multiple times, which was described as burdensome by Molly, Em, and Richard. The support would also be continuous to match the non-linear grief process that is not time-bound (Doka, 2017; Edelman, 2020; Kessler, 2019). The want for support did not seem to be a function of institutional size, as participants who attended smaller schools articulated the same desire as participants from larger institutions.

Clearer Processes

Like the want for a centralized process, participants articulated the desire for clearer processes that would provide greater flexibility as they navigated their death losses. It seems that while most faculty members were flexible, the adjustments were done at the individual class level, meaning the bereaved student had to negotiate across all their courses (e.g., Olivia and her chemistry lab instructor, Preston with their English professor, and Emma with her project groupmates). Em and Richard both discussed aiming for the minimum requirements of their senior theses in order to allow them to graduate. Options like considerations for absences, extensions for assignments, taking incompletes, or withdrawing from a course were alternatives participants wished they had had access to or that were suggested by faculty. These supportive measures corresponded with recommendations from the literature (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008, 2010; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008).

Intersections of Identity and Grief

Chapter IV included themes related to participants' identities (and their intersections with grief) that began to emerge from the interviews. While these categories did not occur at the same frequency as the main themes, it is worth noting the importance of these voices in this body of research, especially when they come from members of populations that are typically minimized

or excluded in this field. This study used a constructivist approach to weave together the grief

narratives of parentally bereaved college students through Baxter-Magolda's and Schlossberg's

theories, however the interplay of identities and grief, especially those of historically oppressed

populations, requires a poststructural perspective that considers self-authorship from a critical

lens and presents it as "a fluid process that responds to power structures embedded within

changing contexts rather than a developmental continuum that moves toward complexity" (Abes

& Hernández, 2016, p. 104). Continued work in this area is sorely needed.

Implications for Practitioners

Previous sections and chapters have presented the stories of the participants, what they

experienced, and the support they received (or wished they had received) following their parents'

deaths. The following recommendations for student affairs practitioners result from those stories

and are informed by research on bereaved college students. They include campus-wide trainings

on grief and appropriate resource referrals; a highly visible website with policies, procedures,

and resources; and opportunities for students to connect with other bereaved peers through group

therapy.

Grief Training

One suggestion is expanding grief-related training to the entire campus community to

highlight ways that faculty, students, and staff can support bereaved students and connect them

to resources and services on-campus. A highly visible landing page for grief resources is also

recommended along with the reconsideration of grief groups and how they operate.

Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008) outlined recommendations for training residential life staff

and faculty, as members of those groups are typically some of the first institutional staff

members to receive notice about a death loss. These two constituencies are certainly major

players, but the findings of this study suggested that this training should be expanded to create a grief-informed campus (Schuurman & Mitchell, 2020) that normalizes grief and shows that there is not only one way to grieve. Participants in this study shared their news with faculty, counselors, staff, and friends, but were seldom referred to additional resources on-campus. The steps outlined in Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008) included observing and inquiring, taking the time to listen, using statements that validate instead of isolate, offering tangible support, and referring to additional resources. These guidelines allow campus personnel to best support bereaved students. Including the tasks of mourning (Worden & Winokuer, 2011) would also be helpful.

Referral Recommendations

While it is important to be present and listen, validating feelings and offering tangible support or referral elsewhere is crucial (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). Participants mentioned that they received condolences, but were not supported with resources or referrals. Sometimes the notification turned into the other person's reckoning with death and the bereaved individual ended up comforting them, as Molly described her interactions with friends. Em shared that their supervisor asked the RA staff to sign a card, but never mentioned why. Em was then presented a card with signatures and zero context and became upset upon realizing they now had to explain this event to their peers, which was the last thing Em wanted to do. Bringing awareness to the needs of students who experience a death loss through a campus-wide training can associate action with empathy and offer the support so deeply desired.

After receiving the news (and not making it about themselves), members of the campus community should be aware of at least one resource to which they can refer the bereaved student. This step can be a direct connection to a support office (often the counseling center or Dean of Students office) or notifying a campus CARE team, which is a group of professionals who

126

integrate social work theory into student affairs practice through case management (Adams et al., 2014). Institutions have worked hard to build these comprehensive, multidisciplinary CARE teams (Van Brunt et al., 2012), but since bereaved students are not being referred, they are missing a critical on-ramp to this support and the associated services. Once the students are on the radar of the CARE team, the case managers can use a triage model (Likis-Werle et al., 2020) to determine the best course of action. Lower-level matters can be addressed by student affairs teams, whereas higher-level crises may result in a direct referral to the counseling center. The middle level, though, presents the opportunity for college counselors and student affairs professionals "to work together as a team, aligning their communication, strategies, and responses to students" (Likis-Werle et al., 2020, p. 135). Once the bereaved student's case is in the system, continued, periodic check-ins can occur to help the student feel seen as they continue through grief, instead of the support vanishing after two weeks. It is also important to note that some students might not be ready to engage with enhanced support so all offerings should be optional.

Highly Visible Resource Website

While a community-wide network is wonderful, access to care should not be contingent on a referral. Information about resources and services for bereaved students should be highly visible and easily accessible on an institutional website. What matters not is the host office, but rather that some sort of landing page exists. It can include the link to the CARE referral for students to self-disclose and report their loss and also provide information about academic policies, financial aid processes, and access to emergency funding, if available. The creation of a central site will allow faculty and staff easy access to the information and bypass the need for grieving students to hunt down the information or retell their story five times or more. A

127

resource page offering this information in one place would help answer the questions participants

asked: "What resources are available to me?" and "What services am I eligible for?" This online

resource would also benefit all types of students, especially commuters or students who live off-

campus (like Gianna, Emma, Rae, and Catherine), since it does not need to be delivered in-

person or through traditional information pathways of a residential campus. Its existence would

also help to normalize grief and provide resources for members of the bereaved student's support

network like friends, family, and faculty and staff (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

Grief Therapy

Another resource that needs to be reconsidered is group grief therapy. This opportunity

was highly desired by participants since it paired the benefits of counseling and the connection to

other bereaved peers, another key want that was articulated. As these groups are being designed,

practitioners should refer to the structure outlined in Vickio (2008). Individual sessions certainly

have their place in processing a death loss, but a group setting can help normalize an incredibly

isolating experience like grief (Battle et al., 2013). As these initiatives take shape, it is critical

that they are offered at student-friendly times (i.e., outside of regular business hours) so that

students can actually attend and not have to choose between the session and their class schedules,

as Olivia did. It is vital that services are also culturally responsive to the participants' range of

identities (Varga et al., 2022). As an alternative, referrals to local groups or online options should

be included in the centralized resource list.

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Limitations

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Qualitative phenomenological studies seek to better understand what is being experienced

by understanding how it is being experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). Thus, the findings may not

be generalizable widely, but can provide insight on the specific type of event based on the

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128

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"researcher's analysis and understanding of circumstances rather than on the collection of representative data" (Carminati, 2018, p. 2096). The study included 10 participants who were undergraduate students at four-year colleges and universities, but the types of institutions they attended varied from large state universities with more than 40,000 students to small, private colleges with fewer than 1,100 students. The findings from this study can provide insight to how parentally bereaved college students navigate the loss of a parent; however, the institutional context must be taken into account. Much like the variety of institution types, the pool was far from homogenous. Still, additional participants could help to demonstrate a broader perspective on grieving the death of a parent while enrolled in college.

The study commenced in the second half of the spring semester, which is typically a busy time when students, faculty, and staff are focused on completing the academic year. This late-semester timing was not ideal, as academic obligations most likely took priority over a research study invitation. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the recruitment process relied on staff or faculty members to refer qualified participants to the study. This referral method introduced a possible diversion before reaching the intended audience. The referral process assumed that individuals who worked with bereaved students maintained positive relationships with them. In light of the findings, especially in cases where the bereaved student expected more from their faculty or staff contact, the quality of those relationships may not allow for the referral to be delivered or taken sincerely.

Just as the context of the death influenced the way bereaved students grieve (Balk et al., 2010; Cupit et al., 2016; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008), the position of the individual on their grief journey may inhibit their readiness to discuss the topic (Bonanno & Mancini, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Considering the time since the death (Murrell et al., 2018), the recently

bereaved may still be occupied with the loss and restoration stressors of the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This apprehension or busyness with other matters may explain why four individuals completed the informed consent form and then never scheduled their introductory interview.

While the interview was intended as a way to establish empathy, trust, and sensitivity (Wright & Flemons, 2002), the methodology of an interview itself could itself be a limitation, especially around this topic. The initial call for participants detailed the two-part interview process that could take one-and-a-half to two hours. This timeframe could be too long and rely too much on emotional labor related to revisiting a death (Gilbert, 2002). The fact that this study did not provide compensation also may have limited participation; however, nearly all participants thanked me for doing this work, demonstrating the relational integrity established that honored the sacredness of the retelling of these stories (Wright & Flemons, 2002). Individuals may have been more inclined to participate in a study that allowed them to write out their response as respondents did in Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) or respond to a survey where they did not have to disclose too much about their personal experience with the death of their parents.

There are still limitations even with the participants interviewed for the study. I intended to add underrepresented voices to the body of death research and, as a result, garnered a fairly diverse pool of candidates. I disclosed my experience with parental death loss (Varga, 2021), but my visible identities may have limited what participants shared. While I was an insider in one sense, there were instances where my identities were not similar and participants may have been "less likely to discuss experiences for which the interviewer would have been an outsider, such as racialized experiences" (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022, p. 139).

Suggestions for Future Research

A dissertation is only the first step in establishing a research agenda. This study has highlighted some trends in the experiences of parentally bereaved college students, but there is still work to do. This section explores some routes for continued research in this area.

The introductory interview included a question about the personal identities that participants found salient. This question existed to get an idea of who was represented in the participant pool, as I intended to include historically marginalized voices in the research. Elements of these identities were resurfaced by some participants as they explained their experiences following the deaths of their parents. Examples included Rae's experience as a child of Mexican immigrants who idolized Trump, Richard attending his father's 40-day service in Nigeria where only Yoruba was spoken, and Em's medical transition in parallel with their father's declining health. While this question provided some context to the interviews and occasionally reappeared, there is still more to discover in the ways that individual identities influence grief. I hope that this study can continue to widen the scope of participant perspectives included in thanatological research. Instead of generalizing findings in aggregate, greater investigation into the interplay of identity and grief is needed.

Similarly, another study can examine the relationship between the bereaved students' majors or courses of study and how the academic background or experiences of that discipline inform grief processing and coping strategies. It would be interesting to see if the death of their parents influenced careers post-graduation. For instance, two participants, Em and Catherine, are currently working in housing and residence life. Their student affairs experiences were apparent in their recommendations due to their familiarity with higher education infrastructure and now being part of the CARE network for students. My professional experience was certainly shaped

by the death of my father and the numerous students I have connected with as a result of their losses. This positionality lends itself to an autoethnography that "illuminates the relational, often unseen, complex nature of higher education—portraying participation that calls for care, connectedness, and sensitivity … as we choose to understand the academic self and vocation as personal, social, emotional, embodied, and mindful" (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2022, p. 215).

This study has focused on the individual experiences of bereaved college students based on their knowledge and awareness of resources at their institutions. A possible extension is shifting the focus to the institutional level and assessing the services provided by colleges and universities. This research can take the form of case studies of care support mechanisms like Servaty-Seib and Liew (2019) that looked at one institution or a scoping/systematic review like Valentine and Woodthorpe (2020) that canvassed institutional websites across the U.K. searching for bereavement policy language. Another opportunity is the replication of Erickson's (1991) dissertation that involved the direct survey of student affairs officers and the services their institutions provided. The side-by-side comparisons after 30 years could indicate progress or highlight the work that still needs to be done. Whatever the method, revisiting the level of institutional readiness to support grieving students is an important contribution to this body of research.

Conclusion

College is already a time of maturation, often filled with competing priorities that challenge young adults to seek new experiences as they learn and grow through experimentation and failure. There is a lot of uncertainty as students develop in different ways and embrace new identities and perspectives. Now factor an incredibly disruptive event like the death of a parent into this already dynamic environment. Add in the upheaval of a global pandemic while you are

at it. Plates were full before these events; now there is even more to deal with. How do students deal with the demands of attending to their grief while they also have to attend their classes? How do students balance their desire to pick their outfit for this weekend's party when they just picked out the clothes in which they buried their mother or father? How does one summon the courage to tell others about what they are going through when they would rather not confront the reality that someone they love is gone?

These questions explain the importance of this study that aimed to gather the stories of parentally bereaved college students and identify the resources they used to navigate their loss and ways that institutions can better support students like them. This study identified themes across these three areas, most of which were substantiated by existing literature around the general population of bereaved college students. Based on the narratives shared in this qualitative study, recommendations for student affairs practice were identified and informed by the needs expressed by the participants and supported by research on this topic. The goal of which is to help our campus communities better understand and support their students as they navigate one of the toughest experiences they will encounter. It is time for us to match our sympathy with support.

Coda

Amidst my data collection this summer, I attended an event where a colleague, friend, and talented spoken word artist, AVG (Gabriel Angrand), shared one of his poems. His words resonated with me as stanzas aligned with the threads emerging from my research interviews.

Our healing begins with speaking

And while this part of our journey
is hardly ever easy, it's hardly ever wasteful either

In our struggle to release,

We learn the value of exchange
How to trade our deepest secrets for solace,
And give up our gilded silence for sanity,
We reach for the broken soil beneath our burdens
That our seeds may grow like white-colored roses

And in the swaying of our snow-colored meadows,
We learn the beauty of surrender
How to fill our beings with chamomile,
And lavender our tiring souls,
We reach for the rays behind our rainclouds
That sunlight may bathe us like waterfall

With sunkissed skin just a hair shy of sunburn,
We learn the sacredness of purging
How to soften our hearts
And breathe in all of our senses
We reach for the peace above our pain
To let that sky be our guide to freedom

And in the safety of this sanctuary,
We learn the power of embrace
How to weave our stories into celestial tapestries
And find purpose in the midst of it all
We reach for the truths along our journey
So our voices change others like the seasons

But it all begins with speaking
Through you, another being will see
the power of releasing
And while it's hardly ever easy,
it's hardly ever wasteful either

This
is the circle of healing

This is the kind of community we create
when we rest
in a "Circle of Healing"

AVG (Gabriel Angrand)

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138

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APPENDIX A: REFERRAL LETTER AND FLIER

Email sent to Deans of Students via New England Deans listserv and ACUHO-I Small Colleges & Universities network aliases. The researcher is a member of both of these groups and will use the networks' listservs to send a call for referrals via email. As a benefit of membership of these groups, no special permission is needed to use these listservs. This message was also sent to select members of Actively Moving Forward (AMF).

Dear colleague,

My name is Scott Wojciechowski and, in addition to serving as the Associate Dean of the College at Haverford College, I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. I am writing today to seek your help in finding participants for my dissertation study focused on current students or recent graduates who experienced the death of a parent in the last three years (since January 2020) while they were enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year institution. Completion of a degree program is not a prerequisite, as some individuals may have postponed or ended their enrollment as a result of their parent's death.

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I am requesting referrals of individuals who may be interested in discussing their experiences. While I welcome all narratives, I am specifically seeking individuals from underrepresented identities as these voices are not often included in death research. For the purposes of this study, a parent is not solely defined in a biological sense, but rather by the student's selection of a parental figure who plays a pivotal role emotionally and/or financially. This "parent" may be a mother, father, grandparent, close relative, foster parent, etc.

Our roles in student affairs allow us to observe many aspects of the student experience - the highs and the lows. I have worked closely with numerous students who have navigated the death of a parent and, as a result, I have learned skills that inform my work. Some colleagues have not been exposed to this topic or do not feel comfortable with the subject, which limits the capacity to support students through their grief and bereavement. My research aims to illuminate this major event in the lives of our students. As a result of this study, I plan to make recommendations for student affairs practitioners to better support parentally bereaved students.

This study has been approved by the University of North Carolina Greensboro's Institutional Review Board. Participation in this study includes the completion of Informed Consent and an introductory interview (~30 minutes) via Zoom during which individuals will be asked about their demographics and experience with the death of their parent. Based on the introductory interview, participants may be invited for a second Zoom interview (~45-60 minutes) to examine

what students felt, how they balanced being a student with other obligations, and what resources they used (or did not use).

I ask that you share this invitation (in whole or in part) with students who meet the inclusion criteria: current students or recent graduates who experienced the death of a parent within the last three years (since January 2020) while actively enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year institution, even if they did not complete their degree. I have also attached a graphic with this information that you can share. Please consider forwarding the graphic and the Informed Consent to possible participants. Interested students can complete the Informed Consent and I will contact them to coordinate the introductory interview. Your referral is not an obligation to participate. If you or your potential referrals have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me or my supervisor, Dr. Brad Johnson. Our contact information is listed below.

Thank you for considering this request, especially with your busy schedule. Your assistance in identifying students for this study is very much appreciated. I believe their insights will benefit others and may help them continue to work through their loss.

Yours sincerely,

Scott Wojciechowski	Brad Johnson, Ph.D.
Doctoral Candidate, UNC-Greensboro	Dissertation Chair
Associate Dean, Haverford College	Clinical Associate Professor, UNC-Greensboro
swwojcie@uncg.edu	brad.johnson@uncg.edu

Email attachment:

Participant Call Flier

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Impact of parental death on college students

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable):

    Scott Wojciechowski, Doctoral Candidate, swwojcie@uncg.edu

    R. Bradley Johnson, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee Chair, brad.johnson@uncg.edu

Participant's Name: [Short answer text box]

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to explore how current students or recent graduates who experienced the death of a parent in the last three years (since January 2020) while they were enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year institution navigate their grief. For the purposes of this study, a parent is not solely defined in a biological sense, but rather by the student's selection of a parental figure who plays a pivotal role in a college student's experience both emotionally and financially. This "parent" may be a mother, father, grandparent, close relative, foster parent, etc.

Why are you asking me?

You are being asked to participate because you experienced the death of one of your parents during your undergraduate college career.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

The study will involve an introductory interview conducted virtually via Zoom (~30 minutes) during which you will be asked questions about demographic information and the experiences related to the death of your parent. Based on your responses in the introductory interview, you may be invited to participate in a follow-up interview (also conducted virtually) that will last 45-60 minutes. There may be additional contact following the initial interview for any follow-up questions or clarification. The topics of death, grief, and bereavement will be discussed. These topics may be sensitive for some participants and cause emotional reactions. The interviews are not intended to retraumatize you, but rather explore your experiences after the loss of your parent. If, at any point, you wish to discontinue the interview, your request will be respected. Any questions can be directed to Scott Wojciechowski (swwojciec@uncg.edu).

Is there any audio/video recording?

The interview will take place using Zoom and the audio and video will be recorded. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed, although access to the recording will be limited to the researcher.

What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. The topics of death, grief, and bereavement will be discussed. These topics may be sensitive for some participants and cause emotional reactions. While this process may allow for points of helpful sharing and reflection, the interviews are not therapy and the researcher is not a counselor. Information on grief-related resources will be offered at the conclusion of each interview.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Scott Wojciechowski (swwojcie@uncg.edu) or Dr. Brad Johnson (brad.johnson@uncg.edu).

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
Sharing your experiences regarding the death of your parent may benefit other individuals navigating loss. College administrators may also benefit as they learn about the experience of bereaved college students and how they can adjust policies and procedures to better support students who are grieving.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
Participating in this study may present an opportunity for you to reflect on the death of your parent. This reflection may help you to engage with your grief and explore ways to continue coping with loss. Participation may also present you new resources and/or remind you of the resources to which you already have access.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?
Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential. To protect your identity as a research subject, you will be given a pseudonym, and no identifying information will be released. Audio and video of interviews will be recorded. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed, although access to the recording will be limited to the researcher. All identifying information will be kept separate from the recordings. Interviews will be transcribed with the opportunity to review your statement following the transcription. All files related to the interview (e.g., recordings and transcripts) will be saved to a cloud-based file storage which is protected by a password using two-factor authentication. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By completing this survey, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing to consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By choosing YES below, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by Scott Wojciechowski

 Multiple Choice options:

[Yes, I am 18 years of age or older and agree to participate in this study.]

[No, I do not agree to participate in this study.]

Survey Logic/Flow:

Choosing [Yes…] will direct the participant to the contact information page.

Choosing [No…] will end the survey.

 CONTACT INFORMATION

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. In order to schedule the introductory interview, please enter your contact information and general availability.

Email Address: [Short answer text box]

Phone Number: [Short answer text box]

Describe your general availability for a 30-minute interview conducted via Zoom. [Long answer text box]

If you have any questions or no longer wish to participate, please contact Scott Wojciechowski, Doctoral Candidate and Principal Investigator, at swwojcie@uncg.edu.

APPENDIX C: INTRODUCTORY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questions are italicized.

Introduction

1. Welcome and introductions
    1. Researcher introduces himself (name, pronouns)
    2. *What pseudonym would you like to be used for your anonymity? What pronouns do you use?*
2. Introduction of study
    1. Study goal and process
        1. Researcher shares background on professional experience and personal story of parent death
        2. Outline for introductory interview: demographic information and questions about the death of your parent
    2. Tips regarding subject sensitivity
        1. "I am going to ask questions related to the death of your parent. This topic may be difficult to discuss. Please take however long you need and if you wish to stop, please feel free to ask to stop."
        2. "While this process may allow for points of helpful sharing and reflection, I am not a trained counselor and this study does not replace therapy."
3. Review of Informed Consent
    1. *Do you have any questions?*
    2. *Do you consent to proceed with the interview?*

Context/Rapport Building

1. *Tell me about your family life growing up.*
2. *How would you describe your college experience?*
3. *When did your parent die?*

4. *How old were you when your parent died? What year in college?*

5. *At what point during the academic year did your parent die?*

Parent Information

1. *What name or name(s) did you call your deceased parent?*

2. *How were you related to this individual?*

3. *How would you describe your relationship with this person?*

4. *How did they die?*

5. *How did you learn of their death?*

Impact of Death

1. *How, if at all, did the <u>academic</u> aspect of your college experience change or not change following the death of your parent?*

2. *How, if at all, did the <u>social</u> aspect of your college experience change or not change following the death of your parent?*

3. *How, if at all, did the death of your parent change the trajectory of your college experience?*

4. *With which individuals from your institution did you share the news of your parent's death?*

5. *What, if any, communication or outreach did you receive from your institution (either from an office or an individual)?*

Demographic Information

1. *What identities are salient for you? Examples include race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.*

2. *Do you consider yourself a first-generation college student? When I say first-generation, I mean the first person in your immediate family to attend college or complete a four-year degree.*

3. *Where did you attend college? How far was campus from the location of your deceased parent's home?*

4. *What was your living situation at the time of your parent's death?*

5. *What was/is your major or area of study?*

6. *How would you describe your level of involvement on-campus? What clubs, organizations, and activities were you a part of, if any?*

7. *What best describes your degree completion status: Graduated, Currently Enrolled, Currently On-Leave (Plans to Return), Did Not Complete (No Longer Enrolled)?*

Next Steps and Wrap Up

1. Thank the participant for their time and offer to connect to grief resources.

2. Share details about potential invitation for a second interview.

   1. *If you are invited to participate in a second interview, what is the likelihood that you would accept?*

3. Share information about member checking once the transcript is complete and themes are generated.

APPENDIX D: SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questions are italicized.

Introduction

1. Welcome back and check-in
2. Review Informed Consent and Reminder of Subject Sensitivity
   1. "I am going to ask questions related to the death of your parent. This topic may be difficult to discuss. Please take however long you need and if you wish to stop, please feel free to ask to stop."
   2. "While this process may include helpful sharing and reflection, I am not a trained counselor and this study does not replace therapy."
   3. *Do you have any questions?*
   4. *Do you consent to proceed with the interview?*

Support and Resources

1. "I have a few questions about support and resources. When I say support, I mean assistance financially, emotionally, socially, or academically or anything that you would consider support that I did not mention. When I say resources, I mean programs or benefits like religious groups, counseling or therapy, information on the Internet or social media, a policy option like late assignments, withdrawing from a course, or taking a leave of absence, or anything you would consider a resource that I did not mention."
2. *What type of support, if any, did you receive from <u>family or friends</u> after your parent's death?*
3. *What type of support, if any, did you receive from <u>your institution</u> after your parent's death?*
4. *Describe your experiences, if any, with official institutional support (policies or outreach from specific offices) or the responses from individual faculty or staff members?*
5. *What resources did you take advantage of?*
6. *What, if any, resources do you wish you had used that you did not?*

7. *What resources or support, if any, were lacking that you wish you had access to?*
8. *If you were in charge of the institution, what would you offer to help students like yourself?*

Dual Process Related Questions

1. *Describe what was going on at the time of your parent's death and the weeks that followed. What did you focus on?*
2. *How did you manage things related to the death of your parent? Examples may include preparing for the funeral, attending to your grief, supporting your loved ones.*
3. *How did you manage things related to your school work?*
4. *How did you manage things related to your social engagement on-campus?*
5. *How did you try to balance your priorities across these areas?*
6. *If you had a second chance to do things differently, what might you have changed?*

Status Check

1. *How are you doing now?*
2. *What advice would you give to someone who is in a similar situation?*

Next Steps and Wrap Up

1. Thank the participant for their time and offer to connect to grief resources.
2. Share information about member checking once the transcript is complete and themes are generated.
3. "I may reach out if I need any additional clarification or information."

APPENDIX E: RESOURCE REFERRAL LIST

Resource Referral List

Actively Moving Forward (AMF)

Actively Moving Forward®, a HealGrief® program, is a national network created in response to the needs of grieving young adults. For over a decade, we have connected, supported, and empowered grieving young adults to "actively move forward" in memory of their person.

https://healgrief.org/actively-moving-forward/

App Download: https://healgrief.org/amf-app/

Dougy Center

Dougy Center's mission is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. They provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

Resources for Young Adults: https://www.dougy.org/grief-support-resources/young-adults

Self-Care Resource Library: https://www.dougy.org/resources/audience/young-adults?how=self-care&who=&type=

Grief Out Loud podcast: https://www.dougy.org/news-media/podcasts

Local Support Groups

Find a local support group by using the search offered on The Grief Toolbox.

Support Group Locator: https://shop.thegrieftoolbox.com/locate-support-groups

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline

SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Phone: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Text: Send your ZIP code via text to 435748 (HELP4U)

Online Treatment Locator: https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

988 Lifeline

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the United States. 988 Lifeline is committed to improving crisis services and advancing suicide prevention by empowering individuals, advancing professional best practices, and building awareness.

Phone or Text: 988

Online Chat: https://988lifeline.org/chat/

Find a Therapist or Support Group: https://988lifeline.org/help-yourself/

APPENDIX F: THEME MAP

Codes	Themes	Olivia	Gianna	Emma	Molly	Em	Preston	Lei	Rae	Richard	Catherine	Total
Desire for group therapy, connection to peers	What was missing	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	8
Worsened academic performance, lack of motivation	Impacts	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	7
Impact of Covid	Impacts		X	X	X	X			X		X	6
Therapy was helpful	Resources	X		X		X			X	X	X	6
Motivation to graduate or pursue graduate work	Resources		X	X		X				X	X	5
Lack of awareness regarding institutional resources, barriers	Impacts			X	X	X	X		X			5
Grew closer with family or friend group	Resources	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	7
Helpful check-ins, adjustments	Resources	X		X		X	X			X	X	6
Difficulty managing tasks	Impacts	X				X				X	X	4
Covid's impact on social engagement	Impacts			X	X	X					X	4
Blurred grief process, shock, numbness	Impacts		X	X					X		X	4
Avoidance/focusing on other things/distractions	Impacts		X		X	X				X		4
Condolences versus support	What was missing		X		X				X	X		4
Desire for centralized notification process, coordinated response	What was missing				X	X				X	X	4
Financial aid adjustment, institutional money	Resources				X	X			X	X		4
Telling someone sooner/seeking incomplete/more flexibility	What was missing	X		X		X	X					4
Reconsideration of academic path, college			X					X	X			3
Limited communication with institution			X				X		X			3
Evolution of grief				X		X			X			3
Balancing priorities concurrently				X	X				X			3
Lots of energy to manage relationships						X	X			X		3
Sought support from institution						X		X	X			3
Journaling, texting, talking to parent						X				X	X	3

Codes	Themes	Olivia	Gianna	Emma	Molly	Em	Preston	Lei	Rae	Richard	Catherine	Total
Resonance of grief in academic topics						X	X			X		3
Metaphors for navigating death		X				X						2
On grieving practice			X		X							2
On academics			X		X							2
Questioning religion/faith			X							X		2
Getting closer during illness				X		X						2
Difficulty relating to peers regarding death					X	X						2
Increased emotional responses					X					X		2
Missed support from parent					X					X		2
Host role at the funeral, socially exhausting						X	X					2
Desire to start therapy or start sooner						X	X					2
Intersectionality of identity and grief						X			X			2
Socially withdrawn								X			X	2
Desire for more counseling support									X	X		2
Lessened campus involvement						X			X			2
Limited academic impact (part-time student)			X									1
Limited benefit from counseling			X									1
Reprioritizing self-care			X									1
Stepping away from academics				X								1
Religion as a foundation				X								1
Increased focus on school work					X							1
Dealing with immediate funeral logistics						X						1
Increased reliance on alcohol						X						1
Supporting others who are grieving						X						1
Influenced in current career in higher education						X						1
Worsened sleeping							X					1
Grief took the form of worry for surviving parent							X					1
Intentionally limited on-campus engagement							X					1

Codes	Themes	Olivia	Gianna	Emma	Molly	Em	Preston	Lei	Rae	Richard	Catherine	Total
Quick turn-around of funeral was beneficial							X					1
Playing card games (memory of parent)							X					1
The importance of talking to people							X					1
Seeking medication									X			1
Desire for more visible resources for parentally bereaved students									X			1
Feeling robbed										X		1
Using social media										X		1
Cultural barriers										X		1
Faculty sought verification of death											X	1
Supervisor got card without telling others why						X						1