MANAGING STUDENT DEATH AT SMALL COLLEGE CAMPUSES: EXPERIENCES OF SENIOR STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATORS

Lisa Maureen Kirchner

A Dissertation

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Committee:

Maureen E. Wilson, Advisor

Madeline Duntley
Graduate Faculty Representative

Ellen M. Broido

Michael D. Coomes
ABSTRACT

Maureen E. Wilson, Advisor

With an increase in focus on critical incident management in higher education in recent years, a better understanding of the experiences of senior student affairs administrators who have the duty to respond to incidents and care for students and families is important. In particular, the response of these administrators to student death can have powerful positive or negative ramifications, depending upon the effectiveness and professionalism of their actions. By considering a phenomenon that senior administrators experience at small college campuses and learning how others deal with these events, professionals can consider different insights that will help them to be successful and effective, if and when they are faced with these responsibilities. Through a naturalistic inquiry involving interviews with five senior student affairs administrators, this study illuminates how they planned for, responded to, and managed student death at their small college campuses. The study also explored how they navigated the emotions involved, and what they found to be meaningful from what they learned as a result of their experiences. Guiding with compassion is a key factor in the effective management of critical incidents involving college student death. Administrators should approach death incidents by being inclusive of the community and allowing for the different and unique aspects that comprise each situation. Student death can take an emotional toll on a small campus community and the responders, but the priority for responders is to ensure that necessary tasks are completed. Proactive and ongoing training and preparation of staff, faculty, and students may help to foster a more seamless institutional response and better overall management of the incident.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began this doctoral adventure a decade ago, but this dissertation first took root on a very dark, sad, and tragic night in November of 2002, when a group of college students got together for something that seemed like a good idea at the time—but ended up turning into a tragic tale. Late that night, as my friend and colleague, Dr. Gene Chintala, and I were standing on either side of a hospital bed, as a young man lay dying in that bed, I learned a few things about life. I had only met the young man for one conversation prior to this incident, but in one sad, terrible moment, he became a part of my life forevermore. As a young professional who had to learn a great deal about managing student death on the fly, the situation was the most difficult one, professionally, that I have ever encountered. However, it is among the most valuable situations that I have found to be meaningful for the work I do.

We do not learn on the pretty days of life, and what we learn on the ugly ones can stretch us far beyond our horizons. Once the intensity is over and we have begun to move forward, we realize that even in the most difficult and tragic circumstances, there are good things to discover, there are lessons from which we can learn, and there is wisdom to be shared. This dissertation was about asking some wonderful colleagues about the good things they discovered in tragic circumstances, what they learned from their own experiences, and asking them to share the insights they gained, so that student affairs professionals could use those insights to be able to help their own communities heal when the time comes. It was my true honor and pleasure to work with these professionals, and I must thank Diana, Ellen, Kathleen, Michael, and Ringo for their kind generosity in sharing some difficult stories and some hard won wisdom. It is my great hope that I have given proper voice to your stories and to the difficult work you do that not
everyone understands, but that enriches the lives and experiences of your students and your communities.

The long journey through this program and this dissertation became rather Tolkeinesque, in that there were a number of challenges, a few dragons encountered, some deeply humbling moments, but a lot of wonderful self-discovery. While a dissertation is a rather solitary journey, no one makes it through without support along the way. It is a journey that I am so glad I made, and there are some key people I must thank for their support, encouragement, and guidance along the way:

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In an article nearly four decades ago, a young dean of students asked the question, “Student death: What do we do?” Having managed death at his campus, Dr. William R. Donohue challenged student affairs professionals to consider this question long before high profile events of the past two decades have forced us to reconsider how we approach and plan for critical incidents and death on campus. Tracking him down, meeting him in person, and conducting my pilot study with him as he agreed to participate and offer his insights to my writing were among the greatest highlights of this entire dissertation. Bill, I thank you for your graciousness, and your willingness to have some important conversations and great correspondence. Thank you, also, for being the type of professional to pave the way for the next generation. It is my great hope that this study has provided a strong response to that important question you asked us to consider.

A very special recognition must go to the parents and families of the students we have lost, who have so often exemplified the concept of grace under pressure. I, along with many of my colleagues, have been humbled by the stoic strength and resiliency of these parents and families who have endured what are among the most difficult circumstances imaginable.
To those students who were lost to their families and to us: your lives continue to hold such meaning for so many. Through your deaths, we have learned important lessons about life. Whether we knew you well, or barely at all, the impact each of you had on your campus communities was important. You all mattered, and your lives were significant and valuable. Rest well and peacefully. You are missed.

I thank you, God, for this remarkable journey, and for those I have met along the way.
“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

~Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (1975)

To all the beautiful people who make a difference in the lives of students everyday.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the need for increased emergency preparedness and expanded critical incident management has become clear. The need for greater awareness of life-safety concerns and the possibility of having to manage critical incidents involving student death at American college and university campuses has increased for campus administrators during the past decade (Catullo, Walker, & Floyd, 2009). American higher education has been affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and a nationwide threat of a swine flu pandemic in 2009.

In addition, the sense of violation and fear on campuses has increased considerably as a result of active shooter situations at institutions such as Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2007, Northern Illinois University in 2008, California’s Oikos University in 2012, and Umpqua Community College in Oregon in 2015. These critical situations have made their mark on the overall emergency preparedness of American higher education, as well as on the collective psyche of institutions and those responsible for the overall management of critical incidents. All areas of critical incident management, including planning, mitigation, preparedness, and recovery, have been reviewed heavily over the past decade by institutions across the United States, and there has been considerable reflection about what we have learned.

Traumatic critical campus events that result in college student death occur, and no college or university is immune (Zinner, 1985). Most of these critical incidents are not high profile national news. However, on small college campuses, the impact of such an event can be felt throughout the campus, and the senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) on small campuses are often the ones who must effectively manage the issues involved with critical incident preparedness and management that include student death. Westfall (2006) noted that the majority of SSAOs work at small institutions (fewer than 5,000 students). For the purpose of
this study, the use of the term manage with regard to SSAOs refers to the actions taken by SSAOs to respond to critical incidents involving student death, by attending to the needs of the students and their families, complete the associated tasks, and support their students, while fulfilling the responsibilities of their positions and leading their communities forward to a place of healing. During such events, they must also continue to lead and manage the daily operations of the student affairs division (Heida, 2006). In addition to being primary managers of such incidents, SSAOs frequently direct multiple responsibilities simultaneously.

There are issues that must be managed when student death occurs, regardless of the size of the campus. When a critical incident involving student death occurs, student grief and community healing must be managed effectively (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). Media and other inquiries must be handled carefully with clearly identified liaisons to field questions and offer appropriate statements, in order to respect the student or students who have died, their families and friends, and to maintain the integrity of the institution (Jablonski, McClellan, & Zdziarski, 2008). The business aspects that must be considered when student death occurs, such as properly closing student files for financial aid and notification purposes, must also be addressed (Cusick, 2008). According to Cusick,

When a student dies, an array of regulatory, administrative, finance, personnel, and community relations issues emerge that need to be actively managed to maintain the smooth function of the institution and the orderly transition of the student from an enrolled participant to posthumous alumni. (p. 551)

Finally, throughout all of it, the emotions and coping of SSAOs and their staff members must also be considered. However, at small campuses, some of these issues may be intensified, because of the size of the community, and the SSAOs may have to address more of these responsibilities than they would at larger institutions.
It is important to note that not all deaths of college students are institutional crises. The death of a college student may affect only a small portion of the population, even on a small campus, and therefore, would be considered a critical incident. There is a wide variance in how institutions and individuals define what constitutes a critical incident. The definition proposed by Zdziarski (2006) is what is what most college student deaths are and is the definition used for this study:

A critical incident is an event that causes a disruption to part of the campus community. The disruption may affect a department, college, or segment of the campus, but the rest of the institution is able to function without significant interference. However, if a critical incident is not handled well, it may snowball into a full-blown crisis. (p. 4)

In contemporary colleges and universities in the United States, the SSAO leads the student affairs division. Common titles include vice president for student affairs (VPSA) or dean of students (DOS). The SSAO may carry both the VPSA and DOS titles. The central duties involved in managing a critical incident are typically responsibilities of the dean of students. For the purpose of this study, in order to maintain consistency, the research participants in this study all served as the senior student affairs officer at the time of the experience, regardless of what title or titles comprised their role.

SSAOs are often among the primary responders to critical incidents and issues on a campus. They may be assisted by other senior-level administrators, such as assistant or associate vice presidents, or deans and unit directors. During such critical events, SSAOs are also the navigational guides for the campus through emotional situations, which can be challenging and complex. Higher education institutions rely on senior student affairs professionals to respond to these issues with “vision, flexibility, and innovation” (Brown, 1997, p. 2). Possessing varying
levels of both formal and informal training, these practitioners can be thrust into the midst of chaos when a critical incident occurs, particularly one resulting in student death. They must not only attempt to restore order during the challenging circumstances that may ensue, but they also address external entities, such as the grieving families and the media, all while managing the daily operations of the division.

Historically, the positions of dean of men and dean of women were born out of a need for professionals who could be responsible for students, when faculty determined there should be more distance between their role as educators and their students’ lives outside of the classroom setting (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Thus, deans of students emerged from the faculty to be campus disciplinarians and issues involving student conduct were the primary focus of this role. Westfall (2006) noted that early role of the dean of students was often a parental one. The conduct component continues to be an integral component of this position, and there is also a focus on student advocacy and mentoring.

As the role has evolved, so has the senior student affairs administrator’s involvement and expected leadership with regard to critical incident preparedness and management (Brown, 1997; Heida, 2006), which includes working in partnership with parents during crises (Merriman, 2008), and acting with a legal and ethical duty of care for student welfare (Gibbs & Szablewicz, 1994; Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007; Seaman, 2005). Students, parents, and institutions rely heavily on professionals within student affairs to provide leadership and offer guidance, particularly related to emergency preparedness, through periods of institutional critical events (Heida, 2006). Doing so through clear and effective means of communication helps to dismantle barriers between an institution and its interconnected constituents. In addition, part of this preparedness involves the development of campus protocols and policies associated with college student death.
Student death will likely occur at some point for an institution and for those who work in higher education (Meilman & Hall, 2006). There is currently no organized annual nationwide data collection regarding college student death or the causes of those deaths (Grasgreen, 2011). The first mortality study in seven decades to specifically focus upon college students found suicide to be more prevalent than alcohol-related deaths, while vehicular accidents were the primary cause of college student death (Turner & Keller, 2011). This study also found that students are safer and better protected on campuses than was understood, and death among college students was significantly less than it was for young people in the 18- to 24-year old age group for deaths involving alcohol, homicide, and suicide (Jones, 2011).

The response effort to death must be coordinated and managed well, because the traumatic nature of the situation increases the complexities involved. McCauley and Powell (2007) acknowledged this coordination could be difficult for administrators, but asserted that it is imperative for institutions to respond effectively by supporting the community emotionally, academically, and administratively. It is essential to assess the needs of students in order to allow them to have appropriate support and a semblance of normalcy in abnormal circumstances. Arguably, this support is also necessary for those who respond to critical incidents and crises on campuses.

Those who have responsibilities to respond to campus critical incidents, particularly the student death aspect of critical incident management, are not immune to the emotions involved, despite their training and experience (Callahan & Fox, 2008). Halberg (1986) asserted that student death is an event that causes the strength and compassion of student affairs administrators to be severely tested. Sandeen and Barr (2006) acknowledged the complexity involved for student affairs professionals as to who is responsible, as well as liable, when it comes to the lives of college students. When a traumatic event occurs at a small college campus,
there is often a sense of loss felt across the community, and SSAOs are the primary responders to whom the campus community and the families look for compassionate, empathetic guidance through the entire critical incident and beyond toward resolution. Compassionate guidance, when student death occurs, involves the necessary balance of compassion and professional leadership needed for the effective management of the situation that allows for SSAOs to provide appropriate empathetic support to families and the community, while maintaining the emotional distance required to fulfill the responsibilities and required tasks during such critical incidents. As noted by Rollo and Zdziarski (2007), “By basing our actions on an ethic of care for our students, staff, and faculty when we respond to crises, we put a human face on our institution” (p. 5). In addition to providing this duty to care, these senior administrators, as the human face of the institution, must manage their own feelings and stress generated by the death of a student, while providing leadership during what can be extremely challenging circumstances.

According to Cintrón, (2007), death is not necessarily a topic most prominently associated with college campuses, because college is where young people go to begin their adult lives. Cintrón asserted, “The death of a college student generates strong feelings of disbelief, sadness, and questions about mortality. Death is difficult for adults, and for many, the thought of dealing with the death of a young person is overwhelming” (p. xi).

According to Grimes (2002), over the past two centuries, Americans in the U. S. have changed how they view death. Americans once faced death boldly, but they began to separate themselves from it by hiding from and sentimentalizing it in the nineteenth century. This preceded a fascination with death in the twentieth century, where a strong interest in reading about death emerged. Grimes added that public grieving throughout the twentieth century was reserved, and the connections between death, ritual, and emotion were not linear ones. In
addition, there has been an avoidance of thinking about our own deaths, particularly in a culture where youth is celebrated and often appears to be held in the highest regard. Grimes concurred with other researchers that Americans find the death of young people especially disturbing.

From a slightly different perspective, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) argued that Americans do not die well, and added that we do not grieve well, either. Cintrón (2007) echoed this sentiment as it related to the death of college students, in particular. When someone is cut down in the prime of life, human beings are forced to confront mortality in ways that challenge what they value and perceive to be important. The issue of what to do with personal grief while aiding the bereaved can be unclear not only for those in service-oriented professions, but also for those who must manage the issues involved with student death on college campuses.

The knowledge of death in the United States is not a personal knowledge, but rather a professional knowledge (Grimes, 2002). Where death was once an extremely personal event for families, and community members paid their respects within the home, that ritual has declined, and members of this society rely on professional funeral directors to manage the death of a loved one. (For Grimes, North American culture and mainland American culture appeared to be interchangeable references.) In U. S. culture, there is a reliance on professionals to aid those who are grieving through this transition and guide them through the entire death process. In the event of student death, SSAOs are often expected to provide professional guidance during this incredibly personal event. In addition, for these SSAOs, there is the challenge of meeting the needs of Millennial students who have been protected and sheltered (Howe & Strauss, 2007). This generation has been characterized as one that can easily get disappointed and disillusioned when faced with the challenges of life (DeBard, 2004).

Working with young people who are exploring the management of their emotions while attempting to develop their identities and assert their autonomy during their collegiate years has
historically provided SSAOs with a particular set of challenges (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). When student death occurs, the additional stress on professionals involved with aiding a generation that Genova (2006) indicated is considered to be fragile could increase the tension generated by a critical incident. Additionally, this complexity could affect the overall management of the situation through to the recovery stage.

The student affairs division has emerged to become the humanistic branch of higher education institutions, charged with both the overall welfare and the development of students. According to Balk (2001), while universities are academic communities, they also have an obligation to provide compassionate care and guidance. Institutions rely heavily on student affairs divisions to focus upon student welfare and wellness not only on a daily basis, but especially during times when critical incidents occur. For SSAOs, the job is challenging, rewarding, complex, and interesting. Sandeen and Barr (2006) mused that those who were pioneers in the student affairs field would find the profession greatly changed in terms of the duties, increased responsibilities, and functions. However, the role is also not without a fair amount of stress. Figley (1995) acknowledged that caring comes at a cost for those who deal directly with critical incidents.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of SSAOs who have managed and coped with student death at small campuses. A key objective was to explore what was learned from these experiences, or what they found to be meaningful, and what types of support were effective in aiding these administrators. Meaningful refers to what the SSAOs in this study found to be valuable and helpful in the learning process from managing student death that has caused them to reflect, think, plan, and act differently, both personally and professionally, as a result. By considering a phenomenon that we know SSAOs experience at
small college campuses, and learning how others deal with these events, professionals can consider different insights that will help them to be successful and effective, if and when they are faced with these responsibilities.

**Research Questions**

Several research questions served as guides to this qualitative study:

1. How do SSAOs prepare for, respond to, and manage student death at small college campuses?
2. How do they navigate the emotions involved?
3. What did they find to be meaningful, both personally and professionally, about this experience?

Responses to these research questions provided insight into how these SSAOs synthesized the personal impact of managing college student death with the professional role they continue to perform. In addition, these questions allowed for an exploration of strategies senior administrators in student affairs employ or develop when dealing with these types of critical incidents, and how the types and levels of self-care and external support can affect the administrators’ experiences. Some insights into these research questions were provided through a review of the literature that explored the expansion of the duties of SSAOs historically.

Additional insights were gained into the increasing complexities of senior administrative responsibilities, as they pertain to critical incident management and college student death. Challenges SSAOs on small college campuses face when such critical incidents arise emerged as well. Finally, the personal narratives of these SSAOs allowed for a further exploration of answers to these questions with regard to how these senior administrators managed the aspects involving college student death, while indicating ways in which professional and personal support affected them.
Significance of the Study

With an increase in focus on emergency critical incident management in American higher education in recent years, the need for a better understanding of the experiences of those who have the duty to respond to incidents and care for students and families is important. The response of SSAOs in these situations could have powerful ramifications, positively or negatively, depending upon the effectiveness and professionalism of the response. Throughout the literature was a lack of focus on how institutions approach the management of college student death (Cusick, 2008). Thus, though there is awareness in higher education that tragic situations can arise, there is a lack of information regarding how those who deal with these critical incidents involving student death manage and cope with the responsibilities involved. Additionally, there is little knowledge of what meaning they are able to make from experiencing such events by responding to them, or of the value they uncover as a result of their leadership in managing such critical incidents.

Student affairs professionals have a desire to help others, and to aid students in their growth and development during their collegiate years. However, the reality of not only facing the death of a student, but of having the responsibility to manage the situation, is not generally part of their training. The goal of this research was to illuminate the experiences of senior administrators by offering a better understanding of potential coping mechanisms and types of support needed for these responders, in order to promote dialogues about types of training and response efforts that will aid student affairs professionals in their planning for managing such critical incidents.

Examining personal narratives constructed from interviews that employed open-ended questions provided insight into how SSAOs have come to understand the personal and professional challenges and stress that student death can invoke. Additionally, by considering
what we can learn from other fields, as well as from our own field, we can better prepare for such events by having a stronger understanding of what care, both self and institutional, is needed to aid those who are the primary responders to such events. Better awareness of what his needed could enhance the overall effectiveness of the institutional response, because during the event is not the time to attempt to understand what needs to be done (Zdziarski, Dunkel, & Rollo, 2007).

**Theoretical Framework**

For this dissertation, I employed the framework of the five-phase Crisis Management Cycle developed and adapted from other similar models by Zdziarski et al. (2007). The phases of the model are typical of those that are standard within emergency management planning, with the addition of the learning phase. The authors discussed the importance of distinguishing between managing the various components of a critical event and merely responding to the situation. The phases include planning, prevention, response, recovery, and learning. The phases allow for the management of the event to unfold as the necessary actions are followed in a logical fashion.

Booker (2014) acknowledged,

In the case of crisis management in higher education, there is no magical formula or plan that will address all crisis events. Some institutions could suffer hardships when implementing crisis management plans. Yet, proactive crisis management plans must become the norm for universities because man-made and/or natural-made disasters are becoming increasingly frequent at institutions of higher education. (p. 21)

For Zdziarski and his co-authors, having a critical incident model is not just a set of steps to follow in response; instead, it requires administrators to think about and be deliberate and proactive in their actions at all stages of the event. Viewing the management of college student
death through this theoretical lens allowed for the examination of the decisions, actions, reflections, and lessons learned by the SSAOs involved in this study.

**Planning**

As noted earlier, planning for responding well to a critical incident needs to happen prior to an event and is imperative for ensuring effective incident management (Zdziarski et al., 2007). The planning phase is where crisis plans are developed and updated. Scenario, step-by-step exercises, and role-playing drills are strong examples of key types of planning for effective management of critical incidents. As more staff members are trained to respond to critical incidents, the knowledge of policies and procedures across the campus is enhanced, which allows a difficult situation to have a smoother resolution for the entire community.

**Prevention**

SSAOs and their staffs, especially, work toward creating campus environments that educate students on transitional issues they may encounter during the collegiate experience. A great deal of time and effort is spent promoting awareness of personal safety issues, emotional health and overall physical wellness concerns, and making sure those efforts are relayed to the campus community through various formats. By having awareness and prevention efforts in place, if a student death should occur, particularly a suicide, administrators are able to utilize those prevention efforts to create dialogues on campus.

In this phase, an awareness of what constitutes critical issues and working collaboratively with partners across campus should be shared community goals (Zdziarski et al., 2007). Unfortunately, despite an institution’s best efforts at prevention, student death still happens, and how well the community heals depends in part upon how well the community has responded to the situation. By developing strong campus partnerships with academic affairs, athletics, and public relations, for example, SSAOs would be able to provide survivors with avenues of support
and understanding for issues that are difficult to comprehend, particularly for college students who are at crucial developmental stages. Key partnerships with local law enforcement and emergency responders, as well as area counseling and chaplain services, are also imperative for receiving external support for the campus community.

**Response**

SSAOs are often among the primary responders to critical incidents on campuses. At small campuses, when a critical incident involving student death occurs, they are working through a number of challenges. Often, they become the mediators of the campus, trying to balance the wishes of the students and the rest of the campus community against the needs of the families. They must focus on being fair and consistent with prior institutional practice. In this phase, the institution’s crisis response plan should be implemented and the campus leadership should put the outlined plan into action in a coordinated effort.

At times, there is no prior institutional practice upon which to draw, and new protocols must be designed. This phase is where the essence of the experience lies, and in this phase, the pressures generated by the event uncover and test boundaries among constituents, and the partnerships that have been established are the catalysts for ensuring that support reaches those who are affected in the community (Zdziarski et al., 2007). At this stage, it is imperative to follow the emergency response plan that the campus has in place and for all to follow the protocols therein. The plan should serve as a general guide for the entire community, while those administrators who are managing the situation should be prepared for potential deviations of the plan to occur.

**Recovery**

Once the immediacy of the situation has been resolved, the healing of the community begins. Reactions to critical incidents are varied, and it is imperative for SSAOs to gauge
responses of those who have been affected and address them as needed, and individually (Zdziarski et al., 2007). According to the authors, ritualized events and remembrance ceremonies offer opportunities for a community to heal and move forward from a tragic situation. It is during this phase when those who have been caring for the campus community may need some support, as they begin to process the critical incident and the experience they have just encountered.

For SSAOs, this phase may also present some interesting challenges as they strive to determine appropriate memorial events that allow for grieving to be expressed, while keeping the needs of the families in the forefront. At times, these wishes may be at odds with each other. This is an important phase of leadership and management for the SSAOs as they work to offer compassionate care to both the families involved and the community. This is in addition to managing the business aspects involved with closing the deceased student’s account, withdrawing the student from courses, and ensuring nothing that could cause emotional distress for the family arrives from the institution. These complexities increase with multiple student deaths, and there is no time limit on how long resolution can take, especially if litigation is involved. Annual events, permanent memorial structures, or scholarship development may originate during this phase as well.

**Learning**

As this reflective and evaluative phase of the incident begins and leaders begin to process the event in terms of the gaps that were revealed as well as the strengths that were exhibited, it is important to remember that every situation allows us to reflect on what was successful in the response, and what requires improvement. (Zdziarski et al., 2007). This phase allows the responders to review the strength of their plans and the protocols that comprise them.
Additionally, this phase is meaningful aspects of the event become more apparent after a period of reflection has occurred.

For SSAOs, it is a time to review and process the incident to discover what they learned about themselves as a leader, and what they learned about their staffs, students, and communities. The authors also asserted that this phase is a time for institutions to debrief those who responded to the critical incident. This is a part of the learning process that institutions, and senior administrators themselves, may not always do well, because on a college campus, there is always something else going on. Ensuring that the lessons learned are incorporated into the next phase of planning and preparation is essential for improving future management of critical incidents and crises.

**Summary of Phases**

This study is emergent in nature, which has allowed for the phenomenon of managing student death at the small college campus to be better understood through the experiences of SSAOs who have held those responsibilities. Through the theoretical lens of the Crisis Management Cycle, this study has explored the personal and professional challenges involved for SSAOs who have experienced the various issues surrounding the overall management of student death through the course of their time in that role. As a result of this exploration, participants shared their insights into what they learned, both personally and professionally, through those events, the types of support and training that are important, changes they instituted, and how they made meaning of the experience they gained.

**Summary**

This chapter established the increasing complexity in the responsibilities of SSAOs at small campuses of American higher education. Special attention was paid to critical incident management and the importance of compassionate care, particularly throughout the process of
managing a student death. With this evolution of the role has come the need for better critical incident preparedness and management, and student affairs divisions generally serve as the default institutional branch for the responsibility of the lives of student constituents. With advances in technology and the continual access people have to news and events, how institutions of higher education handle critical incidents is increasingly on display for public consumption. For these SSAOs, the scope of their positions continues to increase in both responsibility and complexity, and the need for dignified compassionate care and strong communication is especially important for those who are grieving when a critical incident occurs (W. R. Donohue, personal communication, September 10, 2012).

SSAOs are leaders on the teams of responders who ensure that this compassionate care occurs. However, the management and intensity of these events, coupled with the need to make sure normal functions of the division operate in a smooth manner, can take a toll on the physical and emotional well-being of these caregivers. As the demand for continually improved care and safety protocols rises with a clientele of students and parents whose expectations are also increasing, SSAOs and their response teams must continually redefine their training and assess their available resources. Resources include the human, financial, informational, and other assets that provide support and help to increase such factors as awareness, function, and efficiency to a situation or within an organization. Resources may be internal or external and aid in fostering stronger collaborations, better communication, and a less stressful environment or situation during incidents that may be serious or critical in nature.

Ensuring support systems are strong and stable during times of critical incidents, particularly when student death is involved, is paramount. To accomplish this management effectively, SSAOs must be able to adapt quickly to the unique aspects and dynamics of a critical incident involving student death. They must also be aware of what is happening on campus and
work to restore a sense of balance and normalcy. Putting their own emotions aside to focus on the tasks at hand, these administrators must focus on adherence to established institutional procedures and remain vigilant in their awareness of liability issues and concerns, all while balancing the needs of the families with the wishes and needs of the campus community. Successful management of such critical incidents is accomplished with a sensitive and compassionate approach that reflects a genuine concern for all who are affected by the situation (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007).
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is an overview of pertinent literature that was utilized to inform the development of the purpose and method of this study. The historical and evolutionary path of student affairs administration has been examined to provide a contextual frame to understand better what encompasses a senior administrative role in a student affairs division. The role of a SSAO has expanded from its original duties to include emergency planning and management, as well as student development, retention, and personnel management. Additionally, SSAOs are expected to be compassionate caregivers with a duty to care for students (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007). Comprehending this evolutionary track required an examination of the increase in duties of SSAOs as they relate to emergency preparedness and response to critical incidents on campus. I focused upon how death is viewed and experienced in American culture, particularly death involving college students. Additionally, this review helped to illustrate further the complexity of the issues involved for those in senior administrative positions within student affairs, especially with regard to the personal cost of fulfilling a sense of duty to care for the students in their charge.

There is substantial documentation regarding protocols for how student affairs administrators should deal with critical incidents, including student death, and ways in which student affairs professionals can help to guide students through the grief process. Some of the literature included checklists and protocols to follow for notification (Iserson, 1999) and crisis management procedures (Zdziarski, 2006). Only three books specifically focusing on the experiences surrounding college student death have been published. Death and the College Student (1972) is a collection of Harvard student essays compiled by a professor who taught a course on campus death. Over a decade later, Zinner (1985) edited a monograph, Coping with Death on Campus. These two works are no longer in print.
The topic was again explored in *College Student Death* (2007) where Cintrón noted, “It is not clear if administrators who deal with death experience specific feelings of loss in the forms of depression or anger. When a student dies on campus it can indeed be a stressful situation” (p. xi). However, the question of whether or not administrators who manage student death experience any specific feelings of loss or grief was not one of the questions that guided any of the articles in this body of work. In 2013, Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services published a manual as a set of guidelines for Ohio colleges and universities to follow to provide psychological first aid to students, faculty, and staff following a crisis or emergency situation.

I reviewed the key areas related to the roles of SSAOs as managers of critical incidents. Special attention was paid to the student death aspect of emergency critical incident management, as well as to the personal and professional demands connected with a legal, ethical, and professional duty to care for student welfare. The ways in which professionals in other service-related fields address their own issues connected to managing critical incidents, death, and related stress provide avenues of exploration, which allow for a reframing of the experiences of SSAOs who have experienced managing the issues involved with college student death.

**College Student Death in American Higher Education**

At some point, a college community will face a student death (Cusick, 2008; Zinner, 1985), as will the deans of students in those communities (Donohue, 1977). When student death does occur, whether on-campus or off-campus, most often the responsibilities for implementing the campus crisis response plan, working with the family or families involved, and ensuring that the needs of bereaved students are being addressed falls under the purview of SSAOs and student affairs teams (Utterback & Caldwell, 1989). When student death occurs, it is imperative that the response is professional and truthful, and that the entire matter is handled with dignity and compassionate care for the entire community. Guiding the response is generally a senior
administrative professional in student affairs whose responsibilities include those of a dean of students. For this administrator, the responsibility for making sure this process is smooth is, indeed, a heavy one. If the response of this senior administrator during such an event is strong and compassionate, this high level of preparedness can reduce the grief of the entire community (Donohue, 1977).

Halberg (1986) observed that student death greatly challenges the administrators’ compassion and strength. An institution’s response to a tragic campus event is indicative of institutional values, as well as the administrators’ values (Utterback & Caldwell, 1989). In contrast, if an institution or SSAO is ill prepared or fails to address tangential circumstances properly, the ramifications could lead to a delay in healing (LaGrand, 1985), or legal issues may ensue (Newmarker, 2007). Additionally, compassion fatigue may develop for these senior administrators and their staff members, who may not be supported properly or coping effectively with their own range of emotions (Figley, 1995; Joinson, 1992).

The first work to address the issues surrounding deaths connected to campus life originated in a Harvard course on the psychology of death (Schneidman, 1972). The author, a professor of medical psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles when the book was published, collected nineteen essays from Harvard students in his course, which he taught in 1969, when he was visiting professor. The collection of essays was arranged thematically, and included students’ contemplations about death, at what was a turbulent time in American culture, as well as first person accounts from a Vietnam veteran and students who were greatly affected by the suicide of a young professor. The raw and incredibly personal reflections of the students, their reactions to facing death in some way personally through experience, or philosophically, were powerful and illustrative of a concept that is antithetical to what American culture, particularly its youth, generally focuses upon during the collegiate years. Four decades later, the
feelings surrounding the struggle and the isolation produced by the grieving process still resonate.

*USA Today* presented an analysis of 620 four-year American college and university student deaths over a period of six years between January 1, 2000 and January 1, 2006 (Davis & DeBarros, 2006). Criteria included enrollment at a four-year college or university; the death had to have occurred on campus or in a way related to the campus, such as on a school-sponsored trip; and classes had to have been in session, or as part of a sponsored activity before classes commenced. The authors suggested that traditional first-year students were particularly vulnerable and had a higher risk for death during that first year than at any other time throughout their collegiate lives. Through an analysis that utilized police, school, media, and watchdog reports, they found similarities among all Americans between the ages of 18-24; the leading causes of death among that age group were illnesses, homicides, and motor vehicle accidents. The major finding of this analysis was that first-year students are in the greatest danger of becoming fatalities.

The authors found that although few of the deaths involved students imbibing alcohol to the point of death, one in five of those who died had been drinking prior to their deaths. What makes this situation more critical for first-year college students than for other young people their age is that young adults outside of collegiate life interact more with adults, and students who are residential or live in close proximity to a campus interact mostly with their peers (Davis & DeBarros, 2006, p. 4). Therefore, other first-year students are often the ones who are around them when their lives are in danger, rather than the trained campus administrators or other adults who have a far better chance of getting the appropriate help for students in need. The consequences of these fatalities can be traumatic for the surviving students, as well as the campus community.
Death in the United States

Researchers have focused increasingly on issues associated with grief. Acknowledging that society in the U. S. is in denial when it comes to the topic of death, Seale (1998) argued that this notion is reflected in the academic literature. Furthermore, King and Hayslip (2002) suggested that views of death in the U. S. have changed as medical treatments and technology have become more advanced, and death is something that is often seen but not discussed. In U. S. culture, emotions are mixed regarding the death as something final; a great deal of money is spent on embalming, for instance, as a way to delay the finality of death. Death is on the news daily in the U. S., but members of society do not discuss it (Grimes, 2002). Thus, with this practice of keeping death at arm’s length, the research indicated that Americans are relatively unprepared for death in general, particularly their own mortality.

By examining the experience of Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross as she worked with U. S. medical doctors, O’Rourke (2010) touched upon the issue of how scientists and medical professionals cope with bereavement. According to O’Rourke, Kübler-Ross believed the medical community ignored important facets of the issue of death when dealing with patients. However, she argued that the grief stage theory Kübler-Ross (1969) proposed became popular quickly, since the stages offered a way for death and loss to appear to be something that could be controlled. She suggested that this idea is attractive in U. S. society, due to a cultural mindset of using work as a way to counter the pain and believing we can avoid illness by staying fit and eating well.

Although other cultures have rituals that allow for death to be discussed and mourned as a community, and this was the case historically in the United States, for contemporary mourners in the U. S., grief has been a rather isolated experience (O’Rourke, 2010). She noted that in Western cultures where rituals have declined, an increasingly large number of somatic illnesses
have been reported during the ensuing year following a death. Referring to the isolation and struggle Kübler-Ross had with her own mortality toward the end of her life, before rallying to complete one more work, O’Rourke made a final, thoughtful point by noting that as much as we attempt to celebrate a life that has been lived, there is one underlying message, and that is, “Even a good death is seldom good for the survivors” (p. 5).

An interesting experience rooted within the scientific perspective was offered by Sapolsky (1994), who reflected upon his own journey of mourning after the death of his father. As a scientist, he attempted to create a bridge of understanding between his emotional reaction and his scientific beliefs by examining the works of key social scientists. He was both comforted and challenged by the acronym that represented psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1969) five stages of mourning one may experience after a death. The acronym, DABDA, refers to the stages of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance, and Sapolsky found this acronym to be a way to make grief disturbingly stereotypical when he was the one experiencing his own grief. However, Sapolsky’s exploration of his own grief and his struggle with his own emotions was not radically different from those in the student affairs profession, for whom reflection is an important part of the profession. Sapolsky resolved his journey by suggesting that human beings share a kinship that is part of a universal order, and this allows us to connect with others in grief and recognize it in others.

**Americans, The Dead, Mourning, and Postselves**

The expansion of social media and its usage has allowed for Americans in the U. S. to alter the ways in which they view death and those who are deceased beyond the burying or cremation of the physical body. This expansion has allowed for mourning to be much more public, as well as continual, well beyond the time frame of more traditional rituals involving burial and memorial services (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013). The literature clearly
indicated cultural fascination with the concept of death in the U. S. In a world that is increasingly technological and digitized, the sense of liminality (Turner, 1969) that the dead, and specifically the corpse, of a formerly living person generates still confounds us, for the newly dead are neither “here” nor “there.” Thus, until rituals that are deemed appropriate for an individual’s encounter with death are completed by the living, the corpse remains in a liminal state.

Kelly (2012) noted that while the search for meaning in death is evident, contemporary attitudes in the U. S. toward dead bodies are less clear. The author also asserted that when embalming became a standard practice during the Civil War, a sense of distance was created between the living and the dead, and this distance was further expanded as Americans started to rely upon funeral parlors to care for the deceased. This distance has expanded in current U. S. culture, as technological advances are allowing for mourning to continue indefinitely and far more publicly than ever before.

Fernandez (2011) acknowledged that death scholarship specifically focused on the corpse, its meaning, and what is involved in its representation are fairly new areas for academic study. She posited a thought-provoking consideration by asking whether the bodies of those who have died (and are literally sometimes buried under the living) have disappeared or are still too much among those who are alive. Focusing the premise of her article around the notion that corpses continue to have narratives and lives when photography is employed to memorialize the dead, Fernandez suggested that a photograph not only captures a moment and stops time in that instant, but that photo also stops the impending decomposition of that corpse. However, the narratives generated by these photographs have historically created discomfort among the living, as the boundaries between life and death become less clear.
Kearl (2010) argued that those who die are kept alive in contemporary society by a belief system that merges psychological, sociological, and cultural views. Immortality and transcendence are not new concepts to U. S. culture, nor are attempts to physically preserve the self in hopes of resurrection, if one considers the concept of cryogenics, for example. The idea of an immortality that is symbolic has become quite a marketable commodity within U. S. culture, as one can make plans to have cards or emails sent to family and friends posthumously, and lawyers representing one’s estate can create wills that allow one to exert a sense of control from beyond the grave (Kearl, 2010).

Gibson (2011) expanded upon the issue of how Americans in the United States view death in a different way by addressing the issue of real-life death and examining several high-profile death events that have been streamed live on the Internet. In 2009, live-action footage from a phone video was posted to various websites that had captured the death of young Iranian woman during protests in Tehran. A prior example, in 2008, was of a young man who committed suicide by taking pills live on the Internet, while over 1,500 people watched and interacted with him and each other by either encouraging him to complete his suicide or begging him to reconsider. Gibson (2011), like Kearl (2010), remarked upon the notion that death has a marketable value, but that the imagery permeating the media may be creating a barrier for reflection.

Taylor (2012) and Giroux (2012) separately expounded upon some of the issues Gibson (2011) discussed in her article. A relatively unexplored area of research is the connection between entertainment selection, such as law and justice television programs, and views on death (Taylor, 2012). Citing research utilizing Terror Management Theory, the author indicated that strong anxiety about death may contribute to avoidance behaviors, such as not watching certain types of movies or television shows, or refusing to acknowledge feelings of vulnerability.
Simultaneously, Giroux (2012) offered a rather scathing examination of what he depicted as an increasingly bloodthirsty and depraved U. S. culture that goes so far as to revel in the suffering of others. He discussed violent films, the harsh competitiveness of reality television shows, and the scandal of the Abu Ghraib prisoner of war photos as examples of what he viewed as the increasingly depraved acceptance of and comfort with death by society in the U. S. The author expressed concern for what he suggested is an emerging tolerance in U. S. culture of images that illustrate cruelty, excessive violence, and what appears to be enjoyment of what is depicted in those images.

Verhey (2011) supported the idea that Americans do not die well, despite the efforts of the death awareness movement over the past five decades to reduce medicalized dying and humanize it. He addressed the desire for control over life and death as a response to the disgust within U. S. society at what is considered to be the inability to control the loss of strength and independence that accompany the process of dying.

**Developing Grief Support Communities through Social Media**

U. S. society is youth-oriented and materialistic, and a young person’s death is viewed as particularly tragic, because of the belief that his or her potential has also been denied (Stephenson, 1985). The death of a young person further complicates this issue for those in the United States, because people are reminded that if someone in his or her prime can die, then everyone is, indeed, mortal. Events such as these can be rather complicated for members of university communities to navigate with students.

Because of this cultural relationship with death that inspires both fascination and avoidance, it is imperative for entire university communities to be prepared to help students through the grieving process. Social media often provides outlets for students to share their
thoughts, views, and emotions. When death occurs, students may venture to online communities for support, rather than use campus resources. Monitoring grieving can become challenging.

Blurring the boundaries between the living and the dead are the ways communities of the living continue to interact with the deceased, as well as others among the living, through social media platforms, such as Facebook. According to Brubaker et al. (2013), Facebook provides a public and continual forum that allows grief to become intertwined with everyday life in ways not previously possible. Kasket (2011) argued that social media and networking significantly impacts everyday life and interactions with those who are deceased, as well as who individuals become after death. People who are online (if they are, indeed, among those who are online) can be, to varying degrees, vastly different from real life. When death occurs, the online profile lives on. Relatives are able to convert that profile into a continual online memorial space where commemoration and communication with the deceased is indefinite (Stokes, 2012).

However, this can add difficulty to a complex issue, since, “Ultimately, the online persistence of the dead helps brings into view a deep ontological contradiction implicit in our dealings with death: the dead both live on as objects of duty and yet completely cease to exist” (Stokes, 2012, p. 364). Through the relatively new phenomenon of digital memorializing that has emerged within U. S. culture over the past few years, friends and community members can literally revive the deceased and keep them “alive” by posting comments and sharing thoughts (Church, 2013).

As of February 2015, the number of worldwide active monthly Facebook users had grown to 1.23 billion (Mendoza, 2015), having grown from 800 million active participants in 2011 (Church, 2013). Although the deceased are no longer alive in the physical world, they continue to exist in cyberspace, and the community of voices interacting on a profile page, or digital gravescape maintains that existence indefinitely (Church, 2013). This is an intriguing
concept when considered within the context of Turner’s (1969) idea of communitas, or community. For Turner, communitas is formed during a liminal stage; in this case, when a death occurs. Individuals form a community that is outside of the normally structured society and interact outside of those boundaries. As noted by Church (2013), when memorials are posted online, mourners may develop a stronger bond by sharing their grief and expand their communities with strangers who are also mourning the shared friend. Pennington (2014) echoed this argument that social media sites, such as Facebook, allow college students, in particular, who are grieving the loss of a person they knew to create an online community of support.

However, just as contemplating death can cause a sense of anxiety within any of us as individuals, within the literature is an emerging view that considerations for an afterlife online may also induce anxiety, particularly for those left behind. Additionally, there is a question of how to reduce the anxiety that may be generated in a classroom setting when death is a topic of discussion or a focus of the course, and students have lost a classmate to death. Bollmer (2013) noted that social media platforms, such as Facebook, are creating procedures to address what happens to a person’s profile page when he or she dies.

Anxiety can be caused for an individual’s family, because the overall management of the deceased person’s page, and thus key information, is not within their particular control (Bollmer, 2013). In February 2015, Facebook announced a new feature for users to be able to add a legacy contact, which is a designated family member or friend who will be allowed to manage the account after a person passes away. The legacy contact will be able to post in limited ways and respond to new friend requests, but will be limited in that private messages of the deceased will remain private (Callison-Burch, Probst, & Govea, 2015).

From a faculty perspective, Curtin (2011) discussed the potential anxiety created within his undergraduate course on death in modern theater when a student within the department went
missing during the term and was later found dead. He also examined his own pedagogical
dilemma of how to proceed with the course content and the implications for how his classroom
space and assignments might need to be altered, in order for his students to successfully
complete the course while mourning their classmate. He chose to confront the matter directly by
emailing his students first and suggesting that they work through any difficulties together, and
his students were amenable to that plan. Curtin created a safe space within his classroom, but
also recommended as a matter of practice that online course components such as Blackboard, be
designated as safe spaces for students to interact.

Arguably, it is worth considering both the dilemma and the implications for SSAOs,
when student death occurs, for the experience can present both professional and personal
challenges. For example, coping with death, especially of a loved one, can alter one’s life and
identity. Those who suffer a loss, such as college students who lose a peer, may view life
through death experience markers (Neimeyer et al., 2008). Because student affairs maintains the
responsibility to help students learn, develop, and grow in life beyond the classroom, the duty to
help students maneuver through the grief process also belongs primarily to that division (Ahuna,
1999).

This idea allows for consideration as to whether the professionals who deal with college
student death demarcate their professional or personal lives in similar ways and how these
professionals deal with their own feelings in connection to critical incidents. As the duties have
increased, senior administrative roles in student affairs have become more complex. The line
between administrators’ personal and professional lives, particularly at small campuses where
they may fill several roles, may become less pronounced, particularly if they stay in one
community for a long period of time.
The Evolution of the Senior Student Affairs Administrator

The student affairs profession had its inception during the late nineteenth century, as higher education was changing and the responsibilities once held by the faculty for the care of an institution’s students shifted to staff members whose primary focus was the well-being of the students (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). As a result, dean of men and dean of women positions were created. Although contemporary senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) often have the dual title and roles associated with a vice-president of student affairs and dean of students, the vice-presidential role tends to be viewed as more of a senior administrative planning and management position, with institutional, rather than departmental, fiscal responsibilities (Bass, 2006).

In contrast, the administrative role of the dean of students is viewed more in terms of student advocacy, daily divisional operations management, and as a main student and parental point of contact (Bass, 2006). Although the responsibility for student success lies with all members of a campus community, including the students, for the purposes of this study, the term senior student affairs officer was utilized to be inclusive of all combinations of the administrative titles encompassing the responsibilities for managing the daily operations of the student affairs division on a small campus, including the duties of managing critical incidents involving college student death.

Gerda (2004) discussed the historical gap in the literature regarding the student affairs profession and deans of students, particularly as it pertained to early deans of women. Other literature acknowledged this dearth (Bass, 2006; Westfall, 2006), especially a lack of focus on small college deans of students (Bass, 2006); assessment of the impact of student affairs (Sandeen, 1994); and how student affairs professionals cope with and manage their own stress (Sandeen & Barr, 2009). Sandeen (1994) professed admiration for the early deans of men and women who helped to inject more humanity into the profession through their care for students.
Echoing the sentiments of Sandeen (1994), Westfall (2006) narrowed the focus further by examining the historical development of the small college dean, and she lauded the ability of small colleges to survive and thrive through a combination of adapting to the changes occurring in the larger society and their ability to maintain their traditions. Westfall examined the historical role of the small college dean, because the majority of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) work at small colleges. She paid particular attention to this position to allow for a better understanding of how the environmental aspects of an institution can affect this role. She argued that small colleges have traditionally valued issues involving advocacy, allowed diversity to flourish, and as a result, have developed their own distinct identities. Similarly, the small college dean role has developed historically right along with those changes. Westfall defined the small college dean as one who works at an institution of 5,000 or fewer students, with an increasingly complex and significant role in the institution. She suggested that the range of responsibilities and the ability to adapt to change are among the most important aspects of such a role. With increasing changes in the position over the past four decades, the work of this senior administrative role has increased in both scope and complexity (Tederman, 1997).

Sandeen (1991), an eighteen-year veteran chief student affairs administrator, offered three main roles in which a senior student affairs administrator must perform well, in order to be effective and successful: manager, mediator, and educator. The manager is responsible for planning, managing resources and finances of the division, while providing strong leadership to the division and across campus. The mediator should work with colleagues to resolve issues and help to ensure those resolutions are implemented constructively within the organization. Sandeen argued that of the three roles, the educator was the most important, because in order to be effective, student affairs administrators must be cognizant of student development issues as they relate to an institution’s social and academic goals.
The Senior Student Affairs Administrative Role

Brown (1997) argued that possessing a strong leadership style, effectively conveying the mission of student affairs, and having a prominent role in institutional planning are the necessary components for a senior student affairs administrator to be strong, progressive, and effective campus leader. Additionally, these administrators must possess the ability to make strong and effective decisions, and have well-developed and diverse interpersonal skills. Sandeen (1994) and Brown (1997) concurred that it is imperative for SSAOs to get beyond the continual quest to be respected for what they do by people in other areas of academia and focus more on being strong advocates for students. In addition, they need to be clear and aggressive in understanding and explaining how student affairs promotes and supports the academic missions of their institutions. Maintaining an ethical and legal duty to care for their students, managing the complexities of working with Millennial students and their actively involved parents, and having strong relationships and partnerships with other campus departments and the larger community, can make the overall prevention and management of incidents more effective and rewarding.

Duty to Care

According to Sandeen and Barr (2006), “The question of whether a duty is owed to students is very complex, but it is central to the debate about who has responsibility for the lives of students” (p. 167). As student issues garner additional attention, and the responsibilities involving foreseeable harm expand in scope, senior student affairs administrative roles will also likely continue to develop and evolve. An ethical duty to care for students is not the only sense of responsibility to care for students that senior administrators experience. There are also complexities involved with a legal sense of duty to care for students (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007).

Heida (2006) supported the assertions included in other research that a senior student affairs administrator must have the ability to adapt to change while being able to effectively
manage several roles simultaneously. The author provided several examples of organizational charts to illustrate a variety of ways student affairs divisions are structured within higher education institutions. Due to increasing demands by students for around-the-clock services, the need for outsourcing of services to assist in meeting these demands, and the necessity of staying current with increased federal and state mandated preparedness plans, student affairs has become an increasingly complex division to manage. Advocacy and caring for students are primary to the role, but administrators must also think globally, understand strategic planning, be fiscally responsible, supervise staff members, and work with student governance issues and concerns (Bass, 2006). At the small college, all of these responsibilities must be managed with generally fewer resources and smaller staffs than at a larger institution (Streufert, 2004).

**Working with Contemporary Students and Their Parents**

SSAOs and their institutions must be aware of the special balance necessary for helping students to develop and grow and exhibiting a duty to care for a Millennial generation that has been shielded (DeBard, 2004). Sandeen and Barr (2006) acknowledged the challenges involved in balancing working with students who are legally the age of majority, but who still need guidance, and the extent to which, if any, the institution is responsible for students’ lives. Lapses in either good judgment or in duty to care for this generation of students could have devastating effects for student affairs administrators and institutions in a culture that fuels media frenzy. Howe and Strauss (2007) cautioned that incidents involving lapses in the areas of student discipline, security, or safety concerns might draw a great deal more attention from the media than was previously the case. These authors cited the example of the difference in media coverage between the 1999 Texas A&M bonfire collapse that killed twelve students and the 2006 rape allegations made by a stripper against the Duke University lacrosse team; the latter had far more extensive media coverage.
In addition to having a strong plan for preparedness, institutions must have a clear understanding of how to manage media relations and utilize technology effectively. This includes the primary necessity of being truthful to both the public and those who are part of the institution (Carlson, 2007). Concurrently, Howe and Strauss (2007) predicted that the media focus would likely become more intense in the future, because American culture has a special interest in this Millennial generation. Institutions will need to be prepared for this scrutiny as well, because stories that are widely reported about deaths, criminal behaviors, or tragic circumstances may damage applicants’ views of institutions that make the news. Thus, the pressure and stress of this additional scrutiny on the SSAOs and their colleagues who respond to these issues, particularly on small campuses, could also increase.

When critical incidents and crises occur, senior administrators in student affairs are not just coping with the details of the incident in isolation; they must also take into account potential ramifications for their institutions in the future. However, creating an appropriately safe environment for young adults who wish to explore newfound freedoms is no easy task for student affairs professionals. As noted earlier, students are at especially high risk during the first year, when they are most vulnerable (Davis & DeBarros, 2006). Contemporary students have a great thirst to create and multiply opportunities, and this technologically savvy generation of students is promising and engaging. However, their vulnerability has also increased as a result of being a generation of risk-takers (Edmundson, 2008).

Similarly, Seaman (2005) explored the residential undergraduate experience in order to gain a better understanding of contemporary college students and how they cope with issues such as sex and sexual assault concerns, academics, emotional issues, substance use, diversity, Greek life, athletics, and living on campus, in what he argued was an age where young people are excessive and disconnected. His concern, however, was that with so much attention being paid
by both parents and campus administrators to help students remain safe, students may not be learning how to cope properly. This sentiment certainly outlined a dilemma SSAOs may experience when attempting to honor the student privacy tenets of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) with multiple responsibilities, heavily involved parents, and students who need guidance while experiencing the transitional issues associated with the collegiate years.

Parental involvement has increased in the past several years, as has parental fear in the face of issues such as campus shootings, missing students, and discussions about sexual violence and race relations on campuses. In addition, technology has become much more advanced, and with the capability of instant access comes the expectation of instant answers. As a result, student affairs practitioners need to be aware of what is happening in the vicinity of their campuses, and understand that parents have a general lack of understanding of what comprises campus emergency plans (Merriman, 2008). This increased involvement has blurred the student privacy lines for SSAOs and has provided challenges for maintaining the balance between allowing students to learn, develop, and grow in autonomous ways, while keeping them as safe as possible.

Establishing Partnerships

In order to provide the safest and best service to all constituents, the capability of student affairs administrators to establish and maintain strong partnerships also emerged as an important characteristic in the literature. When student death occurs, having strong partnerships in place between student affairs and other departments is essential for managing the aspects involved. Colwell (2006), a senior associate dean of students and class dean, examined the necessity for strong student affairs and academic affairs partnerships in order to best serve students. He
argued that this collaboration is especially important for administrators at small colleges, and that the relationships developed at small campuses contribute to this importance.

Successful administrators will have a strong and thorough knowledge of how to be effective, particularly with regard to a program philosophy, as well as toward students and their issues and needs, campus demonstrations, tragic events, faculty, and parents (Tederman, 1997). The potential exists for student death to have a wider impact on a small campus; thus, strong partnerships are essential for helping the entire campus to create a supportive environment for healing. For SSAOs, not only is the ability to provide the leadership to deal with those components suggested by Tederman imperative, but they must also be able to understand the underlying issues and relationships found within these situations.

However, collaboration is not always an easy goal to accomplish, which can create obstacles for a university's level of preparedness for a critical incident event. Some departments, especially on small campuses, may not value collaborative efforts, especially when it may mean sharing resources (Stein, Vickio, Fogo, & Abraham, 2007). This senior student affairs administrative role has evolved well beyond the scope of working with student safety, disciplinary issues, and advocacy to include promoting community relations, both on and off campus. Having key institutional collaborations in place, as well as with families, parent associations, and the outside community, can increase the effectiveness of critical incident preparedness and management, and operations can flow more smoothly when these relationships are strong.

**Critical Incident Preparedness and Management**

Zdziarski (2006) outlined the difference between a campus crisis and a critical incident. For his study, he analyzed the varying definitions of what constitutes a crisis, and as a result of his examination, he proposed what a crisis means for higher education. For Zdziarski, a crisis is
an unanticipated event that causes an operational disruption to a campus community and may threaten the constituents, institutional finances, and/or the institution’s reputation. A critical incident differs from a crisis in that only a segment of the campus community is affected, and the operations of the rest of the institution proceed normally. A critical incident has the potential to evolve into a crisis if it is not managed appropriately. Zdziarski took the reader through the crisis management process, discussed key stakeholders who should be part of the campus crisis management team, and offered examples of stakeholder analysis and crisis audit worksheets for administrators to consider in their planning processes. Other definitions of what constitutes a critical incident were similar to Zdziarski’s (2006), but his was most focused toward the college and university setting.

Additionally, in order to aid administrators with identifying types, levels, and intentionality of crises and determine appropriate responses, Zdziarski, Dunkel, and Rollo (2007) developed The Crisis Matrix. These authors acknowledged that critical incidents are much more the typical type of emergency events within a campus community in that they affect a segment of the campus, rather than the entire population, such as a natural disaster crisis event would. Examples of critical incidents include a car accident that caused injury to a campus community member, a fire in a campus building, a suicide attempt, or the death of a member of the campus community.

Although college student death typically falls within this critical incident category, death, obviously, it could be a result of a full campus emergency or disaster. Whatever the level of incident, however, the focus of the response should be geared toward those who are directly involved and affected (Zdziarski et al., 2007). Though similar to Zdziarski’s (2006) definition, the description attributed to Ochberg, Cinti, Goodman, Kirby, Melia, Prior, and Taggart (2007) added the idea that a critical incident may create circumstances that promote change that is
positive and historic, which added a rather unique element to the concept that other definitions
did not.

Having a strong response plan is imperative, but stress can be high both for those who are
affected, and for those who manage critical incidents and their aftermath (Sandeen & Barr, 2009;
Zdziarski, 2006; Zdziarski et al., 2007). In addition to having a strong and comprehensive plan
in place, all members of a university’s emergency response team should undergo ongoing
training for preparedness and to understand fully the responsibilities of their roles (Wilson,
2007). Halberg (1986) discussed the importance of having a set of procedures in place for
student affairs administrators to follow when student death occurs, and the necessity of making
certain all staff members are knowledgeable about the plan and the procedures to follow. She
drew upon her own experience working with such a plan when student death occurred on her
campus, and discussed how following the plan was extremely helpful to the student affairs staff
during critical circumstances. Halberg offered an eight-step version of what she referred to as a
crisis situation flow sheet that discussed the steps student affairs administrators should consider
during a critical campus incident, such as notification procedures and ways to promote the
healing of those affected.

Other literature on critical incident management offered area-specific protocols and
checklists, such as the thoroughly outlined death notification process for student affairs
professionals offered by Crafts (1985) that included a highly detailed student death checklist. He
argued that preparedness is essential for those in student affairs, because “student affairs
professionals cannot afford either to neglect the topic because they find it repugnant or to ignore
the fact that student deaths are inevitable. Preparation and planning will help to prevent an
individual tragedy from becoming an institutional disaster” (p. 30).
In addition to creating checklists and protocols, assessing the response and management of a critical event was also a key idea that emerged from the literature. Paterson, Bird, Burks, Washington, Ellett, and Daykin (2007) outlined several critical incidents involving college student death and the campus responses to those events. After each case was an assessment of the institutional responses, including communication issues and changes that were made as a result of the incident. The authors proposed a list of pertinent questions to be considered, both as a reflection on the outlined case, and as a way to consider changes in response protocols.

Universities need to be properly prepared for college student death with a strong community response in order to meet the emotional health needs of their constituents (Madrid & Grant, 2008; Meilman & Hall, 2006). It is imperative to support grieving students, because of the sense of losing a part of themselves in addition to the loneliness they may feel (LaGrand, 1985). When this occurs, according to the author, community members focus on their own fears, relationships can change, and those who are grieving may become isolated. Cornell University successfully implemented strategies designed to aid students with the issue of suicide, initially, but these strategies have expanded to encompass all types of tragedies (Meilman & Hall, 2006). Recognizing that collaboration can be a challenge at larger institutions, Cornell created a support network throughout the entire campus community by holding monthly training sessions, or Community Support Meetings (CSMs), for those interested in learning more about aiding students in crisis. The authors provided a detailed plan for creating an effective CSM format, which can be utilized and adapted to any college campus. Although this network of support has been helpful in aiding students through crisis, the more-encompassing positive aspect is that creating this network has aided in healing the entire community.

Hamilton (2008) focused on three main areas connected to the concept of death notification on a college campus: notifying a student in the event of a family or friend death,
notifying family members of the death of a student, and offering strategies for those campus professionals who have to notify students or families on how to take care of their own emotional well-being. The author offered practical step-by-step guidelines for effective and compassionate notification. She also acknowledged that each death notification is a unique experience, and professionals must expect to deal with the unexpected. Administrators should be aware of what their staff members are experiencing and make accommodations for debriefing, counseling, and shifting hours or responsibilities as needed. In addition, Hamilton recommended the common sense advice for professionals to be in the habit of taking regular good care of themselves physically and mentally, as a tragic crisis situation can happen at any time of the year.

After the shootings at Virginia Tech in April 2007, NASPA president Jan Walbert convened a group of experienced SSAOs to examine reports and best practices related to campus safety and violence issues, in order to identify the critical issues for student affairs leaders. The executive summary report (Jablonski et al., 2008) offered a complete framework for the planning of, and response to, critical incidents and campus emergencies, with a focus on campus violence, and utilized a crisis management model. The model illustrated the areas of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. As other research has proposed, proper training, handling the media, being prepared for the unexpected, such as issues dealing with international students or students studying abroad, should all be considered and evaluated by campuses on a regular basis.

In addition to recommendations for higher education within national forums, individual states also addressed emergency preparedness planning and critical incident management. In Ohio, for example, in the aftermath of the active shooter situation at Virginia Tech in April 2007, Board of Regents Chancellor Eric Fingerhut convened a diverse group of campus stakeholders who were responsible for crisis planning and management at Ohio campuses. This task force
considered and submitted recommendations to then-Governor Ted Strickland on what campuses should be doing to better assess and evaluate emergency planning and crisis management on Ohio’s college campuses. Much like the NASPA special report (Jablonski et al., 2008) this report (Ohio Board of Regents, 2007) addressed training, mental health concerns, and guidelines that should be included in a crisis management plan. The report was adopted and distributed to Ohio campuses, and summits on campus safety have been held for Ohio colleges and universities since its publication.

Not a lot of attention has been paid to how major disasters have affected American higher education (Stein et al., 2007). For example, when the crisis is a large-scale event, the conflict between job-related responsibilities and personal concerns can be a source of conflict for professionals, such as during the events of September 11, 2001, in New York City. The staff of a university near the Twin Towers was torn between their professional commitment to keep students safe and the campus functioning, and a personal desire and commitment to their families and their needs (Raskin, Fenichel, Kellerhouse, & Shadick, 2002). Additionally, Madrid and Grant (2008) provided insights garnered from their fieldwork as psychologists who responded to the national call for help by counseling displaced families in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Their work supported other research about management on college campuses following critical incidents by emphasizing the importance and necessity of strong communication systems, particularly with families. The authors noted that having clearer and more effective ways for families to contact each other following the hurricane could have greatly reduced the stress families experienced.

Callahan and Fox (2008), an associate vice-chancellor for student affairs and a director of first year programs, respectively, provided a set of practical preparation guidelines, task checklists, and strategies for student affairs practitioners if they face the prospect of managing a
critical incident involving student death. The authors acknowledged that the student affairs division is generally the main campus entity to coordinate the efforts involved in guiding a campus community through a student death. They suggested that awareness of the protocols should also be available to the larger campus community to maximize the swiftness of response time.

Levine (2008), a campus director of a health and counseling department, addressed the additional challenges, such as contagion and the mixture of emotional reactions, involved for personnel and students when a suicide occurs on campus. Suicide, the second-leading cause of death among college students, is prompting institutions to examine their efforts to expand prevention and promote better awareness (Snyder, 2014). Additionally, Levine (2008) discussed the varying reactions to suicide, with a particular emphasis on the impact of the suicide of a role model or leader. Creating protocols for administrators to be efficient and communicate effectively with the campus and with the media, and avoiding romanticizing the event were suggested as guidelines, and models for response were included. As part of the recovery process, Levine suggested that a psychological autopsy should be performed and used as an assessment tool in order to help the campus evaluate their response to the incident and to identify any residual issues that need to be addressed and resolved. Acknowledging that research has indicated a level of stability in the rate of campus suicides over the past two decades, the author noted that the focus has been back on suicide prevention and awareness in the light of several high-profile suicide cases in recent years.

Streufert (2004), who worked in the counseling center at a community college at the time of the article’s publication, also recommended recovery strategies for higher education, particularly the formation of a Death Response Team (DRT), to guide a campus throughout the entire process of dealing with death at a campus, particularly that of a student. Expanding upon
earlier research on recovery issues, and much like the Death Response Team described by Rickgarn (1987) and the Trauma Response Team (TRT) promoted by Scott, Fukuyama, Dunkel, and Griffin (1992), Streufert offered recommendations to provide better training, especially for counseling issues, to make sure the appropriate administrators are involved in the process, and to plan for continued support beyond the critical phase.

Having diverse perspectives is essential to an effective DRT, as is a consideration of various types of death and the strategies for working through them. Like Vickio (2008), the author also recommended that survivor groups can be beneficial. Strategies were included for the DRT to work effectively with the media, families, and the entire community to ensure the well-being not only of individuals involved, but the institution itself. Having appropriate DRT documentation and training are key components for a successful plan. Finally, Streufert called for grief training to happen within graduate programs to help new professionals understand how to avoid compassion fatigue and the stress that comes with managing such incidents.

**Managing Critical Incident Stress and Emotions on Campus**

Various types of loss can create a life-altering event “that leads to the pattern of behavioral, affective, and cognitive changes known as grief” (Romanoff, Israel, Tremblay, O’Neill, & Roderick, 1999, p. 293). At the time the article was published, the authors, all psychology professors and psychologists, acknowledged that minimal research had been conducted in evaluating patterns of coping, as well as cognition and adjustment in the aftermath of loss. The authors suggested that grief is a complicated process, and further research is necessary to help us better understand the complexities involved. Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer (2006) noted that research on traumatic loss is an emerging subcategory within bereavement research and is worthy of a stronger focus.
Just as the probability of student death is high for an institution, so is the likelihood of an institution having to address secondary traumatic stress (Catherall, 1995), or stress effects produced in those who aid or care for those who have been directly affected (Munroe, Shay, Fisher, Makary, Rapperport, & Zimering, 1995). Echoing the assertion of Utterback and Caldwell (1989) that the response of a college or university during critical incidents or more severe crisis events illustrates their core values, Catherall (1995) argued that, like families, institutions are varied in their capabilities of successful facilitation and promotion of healing of their communities.

Those with responsibilities to manage critical incidents, larger crises, and disasters run the risk of experiencing secondary traumatic stress, as a result of repeated exposure to traumatic events (Beaton & Murphy, 1995). Included in the grouping of professional crisis workers are emergency responders, law enforcement personnel, and those who are part of disaster response teams and are involved with rescue efforts. However, SSAOs and other student affairs staff members also deal with repeated exposure to traumatic events, such as suicide attempts, vehicular accidents, alcohol poisonings, sexual and other physical assaults, and, occasionally, student death. Valent (1995) argued that if appropriate coping mechanisms are not employed, “helpers may come to feel, respectively, burdened, resentful, rejecting, and guilty; and frustrated, demoralized, not in control, exhausted, and ‘burned out’” (p. 45). Though SSAOs and their staff members are not considered to be typical first responders, they may develop some of these same feelings in their work with students.

Caregivers, including educators, are under considerable stress when they are attempting to help their students in supportive ways, while coping with their own feelings (Madrid & Grant, 2008). The authors argued for the importance of meeting the needs of those who are caregivers and responders during crisis situations and noted it as a recurring theme in their research. How
well the entire community can heal and recover from a critical incident depends upon how well
cared for the community is throughout the event.

Dixon (1987) argued that when intervention strategies are utilized well, they are quite
effective for helping people who have been traumatized. Dixon focused upon the physicality of
how a critical incident can interrupt the normal state of affairs, particularly on a college campus.
Although he focused more on the universality of crisis and the human experience, this author
provided helpful insight for college administrators, particularly those in student affairs, for
identifying a person who has been traumatized by an event. However, he acknowledged that
steps must also be taken to ensure that those working with traumatized individuals are also
identified and supported.

Four key obstacles can be a problem for successful intervention, which include the
feelings of the worker, the techniques the worker utilizes, the clients involved, and the situation
(Puryear, 1979). With regard to the feelings of the worker, Puryear suggested that feeling
omnipotent and able to solve others’ problems can be an obstacle. Additionally, utilizing faulty
techniques to aid others or not properly assessing the needs of the individuals involved, can also
be problematic. Finally, excessive involvement with an issue can be a hindrance to successful
crisis intervention. Although this work was geared toward those in the counseling profession, it
provided useful information for those in other fields who work with people who are in critical
states of distress, as these obstacles can be pitfalls for those who work in student affairs as well.
In addition, the author spoke of the importance for those who work with critical situations to be
aware of their own feelings and issues and make sure they find effective strategies for managing
these emotions; otherwise, their feelings can become an obstacle.

The work within student affairs regarding grief is crucial for students as well as for the
entire campus community, because student affairs has historically provided the response to new
and underserved groups (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). The authors also asserted that grieving students fall into a group that is often underserved, and student affairs administrators have unique access to students’ lives to help them. However, these additional responsibilities create challenges, because the need for services is continually increasing as available institutional human and financial resources are decreasing.

Grieving students are not the only ones at risk on college campuses, but the ones who are helping these students to manage their bereavement are also at risk. Figley (1995) suggested that those with the ability to be the most empathetic are at a greater risk for compassion stress. He added that research about compassion stress/fatigue or secondary traumatic stress has been sporadic across the fields of psychology, medicine, family therapy, and the social sciences. Most of the focus in the literature through the mid-1990s was focused on how to help those who have been traumatized. However, not much attention has been paid to those who care for the traumatized. In the nearly two decades since then, more attention is being paid in various areas to responders and caregivers, but still not a great deal to those in the administrative areas of student affairs, such as residence life staff members and SSAOs. More focus is on members of counseling staffs who aid students following traumatic events.

Archer (1992) described the burnout of the staff members who were dealing with a campus in a state of panic and had to maintain continual critical incident management, as a series of murders continued over the course of a week. As the director of the counseling center, he described attempting to have his staff take a few days off later in the term, due to the nature of the events and the residual effects, but acknowledged this was not an easy feat to accomplish. Like Halberg (1986), Archer concluded that campus staff members were able to deal effectively with the issue of student death, not because they had an elaborate plan in place, but because they
had people on campus who utilized their instincts to work collaboratively to accomplish what needed to be done, often without consideration for themselves and their own welfare.

**Community Approaches for Addressing Prevention and Grief**

Being able to maintain professionalism in the face of working with traumatized individuals can be a daunting task for those who work at colleges and universities, so support within the campus community of each other is essential for healing. The community provides a network of support for survivors and aids in the prevention of secondary trauma, because the traumatic effects of losing someone can be absorbed and distributed among a larger group (Munroe et al., 1995). Secondary trauma is the stress that develops in some when they hear about the first-hand traumatic experiences of others. A campus community, particularly a small campus community, can be a place of healing not only for grieving students, but for the staff and faculty members who have been affected in some way by a traumatic event. The authors suggested that secondary trauma encompasses the effects experienced by those who aid, or are involved in some way with individuals who have suffered a traumatic experience directly.

Catherall (1995) asserted that institutions dealing with individuals who experience trauma or who are survivors of trauma will have to deal with secondary traumatic stress (STS) at some point, and therefore, must be aware of the toll secondary trauma can have on the staff members who respond. Institutions of higher education fall into this category. The increase in attention to critical incident prevention and management at institutions of higher learning over the past decade has also led to an increase in responsibilities among those institutional divisions whose primary role is to care for students, such as student affairs.

For Rickgarn (1996), there were three key reasons why institutions of higher learning should intervene when students are grieving. First, institutions should be focused on developing their students outside of the curriculum. Next, at-risk students are not able to participate actively
and productively in academic or extra-curricular experiences, and this prevents the student from being holistically developed. Finally, institutions should intervene when students are grieving, for the simple, decent reason that employing a care and concern for students and all community members is what institutions should be doing as a matter of principle.

Balk (2001) discussed the importance of community grief support and helping college students to cope with death and later produced a guide for professionals within the campus community to aid students through the grieving process (Balk, 2011). The effectiveness of community approaches to help campus communities move forward collectively has been part of the literature in earlier works as well (Meilman & Hall, 2006; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Vickio, 2008). With one in four college students indicating they were grieving a close friend or family member in the year prior to another study being completed (Fajgenbaum, Chesson, & Lanzi, 2012), a call for the continued development of a grassroots campaign to build a network of grief support at campuses nationwide was the basis of the article. Citing the growing success of the National Students of Ailing Mothers and Fathers (NSAMF) network that began as a student-run organization at Georgetown University, the authors expanded the argument for community-based approaches to help grieving college students, in particular.

Training and Self-Care for Professionals

The suicide of a mid-career, respected, seasoned student affairs professional at the University of Vermont and increasing stress in the student affairs profession have prompted student affairs bloggers (Dobbs, 2013; Dowdy, 2013; Klotz, 2013; Schneck, 2013) to question why those of us in the field of student affairs are not talking more about the wellness and self-care of professionals in the field. Sandeen and Barr (2009) discussed the need for student affairs professionals to find healthy ways to cope with and manage their own stress to maintain effectiveness in their roles.
These articles and blogs echoed earlier sentiments by Manning (2007), who suggested that student affairs administrators tend to take great compassionate care of students, but do not do as well with providing this care to young professionals. Manning also noted that, too often, students are working mostly with new professionals who have the least amount of professional experience, and an ethic of care should mandate that this imbalance be moderated to reduce stress in professionals new to the field. This echoed an earlier assertion by Oblander (2006), who asserted that young professionals could face difficult challenges if they are operating in roles they are ill equipped to fulfill. There could be potentially serious ramifications for the professional, as well as the institution, in the event of a student death, if the process is not managed well and inexperienced professionals are not supported sufficiently. For example, they could inadvertently add complexity to the situation by speaking to the media without being assigned to do so.

Raskin et al. (2002) suggested that 9/11 was unlike any other disaster or crisis, due to the sustained attention it received and the evil intentions involved. The authors discussed their experiences as staff members, who, like the students they were helping, worried about their own safety and faced their own feelings of mortality. They acknowledged that they were challenged by feelings of “great sadness, intense anger, hopelessness, fear, and confusion” (p. 31).

Boyd and Boyd (2007) addressed the idea that we face a spiritual challenge when we are faced with grief from a loss that is significant to us, in addition to the mental stress that is often experienced when a traumatic event occurs. The authors, both ordained Presbyterian ministers and faculty members within religious studies areas at the University of Oklahoma, argued it is imperative for professionals in academia to have a personal understanding of this spiritual challenge in order to aid grieving students through the transition of a loss. The college student population is often inexperienced at dealing with death and the authors asserted that those
professionals who are better equipped at understanding their own feelings and grief process will be better able to aid students during difficult times.

A key message throughout the literature suggested that the process of coping and recovery should be continual, rather than a single effort aimed at providing closure and healing. Everstine and Everstine (2006) asserted that employers should support employees who may be affected by a traumatic situation in the workplace by assisting them with recovery and helping to restore stability. The authors advocated for work time to be set aside for employees to process their experiences and reactions to the event, and recommended that people should be encouraged to take part in the discussion, but not mandated. Although this work focused upon general strategic interventions and guidelines for aiding those when a critical incident strikes the workplace, there were strong similarities to the work of college administrators working in student affairs.

Additionally, Everstine and Everstine (2006) advocated for the development of a healthy environment by training others to take care of themselves emotionally, particularly in high stress careers. Allowing people to grieve after a critical incident, and aiding them with individual therapy, if necessary, were offered as key strategies managers could employ to offer support. They also noted the importance for professionals to maintain a personal defense system that is flexible and can be utilized when needed and deactivated when they shift to their personal lives.

The concept of resiliency, or the ability of individuals to maintain psychological and physical functioning that is relatively stable, despite exposure to isolated traumatic events, such as death, was another perspective that began to emerge from the literature with regard to managing trauma and loss (Bonanno, 2004, 2005). For Bonanno, resiliency differs from recovery in that resiliency is a maintained level of stability and functioning, as opposed to reactive posttraumatic stress symptoms that one must work through in order to return to pre-
event functioning, which can take months or years. Resilience is key to psychological wellness (Cowan, 1991). Similarly, Griffin (2007a) suggested that some professionals appear to be naturally resilient, but argued that preventative measures and appropriate attention should be provided to practitioners in order to prevent burnout or secondary stress symptoms.

McClellan (2013) discussed the role of graduate programs and professional development workshops in the life of student affairs administrators when they are called upon to aid others who are grieving, including themselves. Recalling his own graduate program, he indicated that discussions about grief and loss were not included in the curriculum, and perhaps should be. He asserted that different skills are needed for helping others to cope with grief. In addition to being a good listener, the author suggested that administrators should be open to accepting the type of help they so willingly give, and they should understand their own limitations and be willing to allow others who have different training or skills to offer assistance to aid students, in particular, who need help.

**Managing Stress in Service-Oriented and Educational Professions**

Literature from other service-related fields also addressed the need for better training of young professionals who plan careers that will involve working with traumatized people or those who are grieving from a death. Similar to what Manning (2007) noted about properly supporting the least experienced student affairs professionals, Kerai and Wheeler (2013) proposed the need for better training for physician trainees, who are often the ones most directly dealing with families and patients regarding end-of-life conversations, and who generally have little preparation before doing so.

Similarly, the importance of better training, more specific preparatory education for working with those who have been traumatized, and the need for self-care in order to manage new professionals’ feelings were examined in the fields of social work (Newell & MacNeil,
A study by Robins, Tomaka, Innus, Patterson, and Styn (2008-2009) highlighted the importance of both appropriately educating students who will have careers that involve managing the issues surrounding death, and experiential training for increasing students’ skills, as later supported by Pasco, Wallack, and Dayton (2012).

Munson and Hunt (2005) addressed the difficulties teachers face when a student with whom they have worked has died, and how teachers face the task of not only dealing with their own feelings, but with those of the families and their other students. They acknowledged that while a great deal of research has focused on how educators can support other children and their families when a student dies, there has been little focus on ways professionals can help themselves or support colleagues in the literature within the fields of education, medicine, and psychology. The authors referenced prior research to support their assertion that teachers often lack the necessary training, as well as a proper support system, when student death occurs. Thus, without appropriate support or taking the appropriate time and measures to grieve, burnout can be a danger for educators. Guidelines for developing an administrative grief plan, ways for educators to support themselves when student death occurs, and ways professional educators can offer support to their colleagues were included to aid teachers through the grieving process.

Also addressing the elementary school teacher profession, Maltby (2008), a former head teacher in a primary school and loss consultant shared the strategies she and a child psychotherapist employed to aid teachers through their losses and mourning and to facilitate the emotional development in the children. Maltby discussed looking at the immediate issue of loss, while considering the deeper emotions of former grief and anxieties that had been uncovered by the current loss. She considered her role to be one of containment, a role in which she provided
a safe space for the bereaved to think, individually or in groups, express their feelings, reflect upon issues, and discover new insights to aid in coping.

For those in service-oriented professions, recognizing and accepting limitations is not always easy. Joinson (1992), a member of the nursing profession, first utilized the term compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue was used to describe the specific type of stress of caregivers, as well as the contributing personality factors that can play a role in causing this burnout. Just as nurses view themselves as caregivers, many follow career paths in student affairs because they have a strong desire to help people. However, student affairs professionals may also face burnout or compassion fatigue from their roles.

Those in caregiving professions have high physical and emotional demands placed upon them (Tamayo, Broxson, Munsell, & Cohen, 2010). These authors were mostly from the nursing field, except one who was a statistician, looked at the quality of life among caregivers of patients who were being treated for leukemia. Recognizing ways in which caregivers need to have further education about the illness, their roles, and their psychosocial needs were found to be the first step toward increasing the quality of life of caregivers. In addition, better and increased communication was cited as an important strategy to enhance the quality of life. Likewise, some of the literature that focused on student affairs professionals who deal with critical incidents and crises also promoted continual training and stronger communication strategies for those who must respond to these types of events. Streufort (2004) argued that graduate programs in counseling and student affairs administration, especially, should include in their grief training specific strategies for avoiding compassion fatigue.

As these issues have increased, the collegiate staffs to handle these concerns have not increased proportionally to handle this increase (Gabriel, 2010). Also discussed were coping mechanisms of the Stony Brook counseling staff and ways they help to take care of themselves
and each other to deal with their own emotional challenges, such as having potlucks at work and sharing laughter over a meal, playing musical instruments, or spending time debriefing each other after incidents. In the mental health field, ethical codes and mandatory mechanisms are in place for professionals who are impaired or traumatized by an event (Valent, 1995). For SSAOs, the opposite is more likely to be the case, as the necessity to maintain normal operations, despite a critical incident event, calls for them to persevere. Thus, SSAOs with a wide spectrum of responsibilities in the small college campus organizational structure may discover that finding time to debrief can be quite challenging.

**Finding Meaningful Aspects, Developing Staff, and Using Resources Effectively**

Attempting to find meaningful aspects related to student death can provide considerable challenges to those dealing with a death experience. Currier et al. (2006) acknowledged, “Sense-making, therefore, denotes both the process of searching for understanding post-loss and the outcome of the searching process at any given moment in time” (p. 404). When staff members are associated with an event that goes horribly wrong, attempting to make sense of the event in their own minds is difficult enough, much less while they are also attempting to help their students also try to make sense of it. Thus, when college students die, memorializing young lives cut short can be difficult, at best. In an event where college students are killed during university-sanctioned traditional events, the task of memorializing a life can seem insurmountable. However, as authors throughout the literature have asserted, a strong and positive response is imperative. Support early on for a grieving community that extends beyond the incident aids not only the academic progress for students, but it aids the overall wellness of the entire academic community (Schonfeld, 2007).

Although she was not the senior student affairs administrator of her division, Holzweiss (2006) offered a personal account of her experience dealing with student death as a member of
the student life staff after the 1999 Texas A&M bonfire tragedy. The author was the assessment coordinator in the Department of Student Life Studies and had been a member of the Bonfire Advisory Committee for three years prior to the tragic accident in which 12 students died and 27 were injured, when the 55-foot bonfire structure collapsed during construction. Holzweiss discussed her sense of loss, and the fact that prior to this incident, the only death she had personally encountered was that of her grandparents. This personal account was written six years after the situation, and she had remained in student affairs at Texas A&M, despite the difficulties she had from this experience.

After the bonfire accident, she questioned why she had chosen the student affairs profession. She stated, “Nothing prepared me for the challenge of providing comfort and guidance to students while trying to come to terms with my own experience of losing young people who were supposed to be doing something fun” (p. 78). She further reflected that even six years later, she still could not explain what had kept her in the profession, and she still struggled with the memories and the images of that tragic event. She learned to rediscover her passion for working with young people and helping them to grow and develop. The author could not specify her reason for continuing her work, and she could only surmise that it was a combination of simply time passing and positive successes working with students beyond that difficult event. She discussed a sense of gratefulness for having gone through that experience, because she was able to gain an understanding of how parents cope and ways in which a larger community could come together. In addition, she learned the importance of learning to manage one’s own experiences and emotions within the field of student affairs as a practitioner. For her, professionals learn best how to do this through experience, rather than from a book or a class.

The importance of experience cannot be stressed enough for SSAOs who may have to manage student death, but the levels of experience and personal knowledge of death vary among
practitioners. Ongoing training is an important way SSAOs may better prepare themselves, and in turn, providing occasional training for the campus community may serve them well in their own responses. The practice of recruiting and training members of the entire campus community in protocols and response is imperative to maintaining smooth campus operations, while allowing for the healing process to begin for both students and the campus community. For example, training faculty members and resident assistants to respond proactively to students who are grieving is pragmatic for SSAOs, because of the frequent interactions they have with students in particular groupings (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). With a strong supportive network, SSAOs are better able to focus on other aspects of the incident and spend time working with families. With proper training and understanding of signs of bereavement, faculty members and resident assistants can be extremely effective in helping students during the early stages of the grieving process. Training is critical for helping all professionals not only to understand typical responses to grief, but for being able to aid others with coping mechanisms that are healthy (Scott et al., 1992).

Hoff and Adamowski (1998) provided an overall general guide to designing training and programs to aid those who work in fields where critical incident planning and management is an integral part of their role. Although the focus was primarily on those who educate within the health professions, the authors provided key insights for anyone who is called upon to manage critical events, such as SSAOs. They provided an interesting argument for campuses that have both counseling services and health services, and suggested that a more holistic design would be helpful, as opposed to having them as separate entities. Because SSAOs often supervise these two areas, this could be an important consideration to contemplate. In addition, as with a great deal of the literature within the student affairs and health services fields, the message was clear
that appropriate training is essential to aid the community through to recovery period where meaning can be made from the experience.

The utilization of external resources can also help SSAOs with their responses. Unlike Zdziarski’s later (2006) assertion that a campus crisis does not affect the surrounding community, Gortner and Pennebaker (2003) argued that when a trauma such as the Texas A&M bonfire collapse happens, there is a collective community experience that produces shock and grief. Being able to draw upon external resources for aid, particularly at small campuses, may relieve some of the stress and burden for the campus, while bringing the larger community and the campus community together.

**Summary**

As the review of the pertinent literature illustrated, the topic of college student death has been addressed in higher education and student affairs, psychology, death studies, and grief studies. The literature covered necessary protocols to follow in the event of a student death, and studies addressed bereaved students and ways campus professionals can aid their grieving students. Some of the literature illustrated the need for student affairs professionals to undergo regular and intensive response training, while including a call for self-care in the midst and aftermath of a critical incident.

Considerable attention has been paid to providing ways for senior student affairs professionals, primarily those who serve as deans, counselors, and residence life staff members, to aid students through the grief process and provide avenues for healing for the entire campus community. However, a large gap exists in the literature about what the experience can be like for those who respond to student death and lead their communities in the healing process. Although some literature addressed the need for student affairs professionals to manage their
stress better, information about coping with student death has not been specifically addressed on a larger scale.

A deeper understanding of this experience may be especially useful to those who currently serve in a senior administrative role or who aspire to be SSAOs. When a critical incident involving student death occurs in a university community, possessing a more comprehensive insight into what these professionals experienced may aid others in their own responses and management of such events. Additionally, those who work in areas outside of student affairs at institutions may find this information to be helpful in understanding different ways the entire campus community can be positively involved in the response to a student death, as well as in the healing process.

Institutions must consider where those responsible for critical incident planning, response, and management on campuses need to focus their attention as they plan for the future. Rollo, Zdziarski, and Dunkel (2007) asserted, “When a crisis unfolds, or when a tragedy overwhelms staff and resources, it is not the time to begin making lists of needed actions” (p. 329). Indeed, for senior administrators in student affairs who are charged with providing leadership in prevention strategies, during critical events, and beyond to the recovery stages, there are numerous factors to consider and for which to prepare with regard to critical incident management. Countless hours can be spent on creating manuals, working through simulation exercises, and training staff and faculty members in order to be prepared for critical incidents at the small college campus.

A key insight that emerged from the literature is that the best way to test and challenge preparedness is through experience. Rollo et al. (2007) argued with regard to overall crisis management that the one constant throughout dialogues concerning how institutions respond to crises is that learning takes place when critical situations occur. What responders learn and how
that knowledge is applied is essential for better preparation. Additionally, the ability to respond effectively is also affected by how well responders have learned from their own prior experiences.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

SSAOs who have dean of students’ responsibilities are likely to experience the death of a college student at some point during the course of their careers (Donohue, 1977; Meilman & Hall, 2006), and will likely have to manage aspects of that critical incident. The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of SSAOs who have responded to and managed student death at small campuses. I hoped the research would illustrate types of support, training, and response efforts needed that could aid professionals in their planning for such critical incidents. Three main research questions guided this study:

1. How do SSAOs prepare for, respond to, and manage student death at small college campuses?
2. How do they navigate the emotions involved?
3. What did they find to be meaningful, both personally and professionally, about this experience?

The focus of this chapter is on the paradigmatic framework, the rationale for the methodology and methods, the role of the researcher, the research design of this study, and issues connected to trustworthiness.

**Paradigmatic Framework**

The research design of this study was a naturalistic inquiry, as I attempted to interpret, or make sense of, the student death experiences of SSAOs through the meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3) the participants brought to the phenomena. Lincoln and Guba (1985) put forth several presumptions with regard to naturalistic inquiry. They asserted that rather than being defined at the method level, naturalistic inquiry is defined at the paradigm level. As a result, control of the variables prior to the inquiry is minimal, as are limitations on the outcomes. This allows for the data to emerge and for the inquiry to develop throughout the process.
Additionally, a human instrument is also essential to this type of inquiry. Another presumption is that the inquirer should understand that the design of the inquiry will emerge fully throughout the study as it develops, not prior to its commencement. Therefore, the inquirer should only develop a general design statement at the beginning of the study. Finally, the inquirer should know about the field sites that will be included in the study prior to the start of the study.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is nearly impossible to have a specific design for a naturalistic inquiry prior to the study being conducted. These researchers also noted that the inquiry should be conducted within a setting that is natural, because “the context is so heavily implicated in the meaning” (p. 187). Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) concurred by stating, “Naturalistic inquiry is very dependent upon context. This stems from its fundamental assumption that all subjects of such an inquiry are bound together by a complex web of unique interrelationships that results in the mutual simultaneous shaping described earlier” (p. 16). As a result, there is no cause and effect; instead, each of the parts is a cause and effect of the other parts.

Erlandson, et al. (1993) suggested, “The primary purpose of gathering data in naturalistic inquiry is to gain the ability to construct reality in ways that are consistent and compatible with the constructions of a setting’s inhabitants” (p. 81). Situating this study in an emergent design allowed for the narratives and responses of the participants to illustrate the various components that comprised student death management.

This study was guided by a relativist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. Therefore, it was guided by the assumption that “reality is subjective and multiple” as viewed by the research participants, or that reality is constructed from understandings that are socially developed as a result of experiences (Cresswell, 2007, p. 17). This study was also informed by the idea that knowledge is generated as a result of a partnership between the researcher and the
participants, with the researcher interpreting ways others see the world and with the understanding that the interpretations will be influenced by his or her own experiences (Creswell, 2007). From an axiological standpoint, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that inquiry within the naturalistic paradigm is bound by values and influenced by the inquirer’s values, in addition to being influenced “by the axioms or assumptions underlying both the substantive theory and the methodological paradigm that undergird the inquiry, and by the values that characterize the context in which the inquiry is carried out” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 161). This allows for a less constrictive and more richly detailed set of emergent responses to occur, which differs from conventional research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described a key difference between conventional research and naturalistic inquiry by stating,

It is ironic, we believe, that in their zeal to meet criteria of internal validity, conventional inquirers create (contrive) contexts that influence behavior as much as natural ones do, but produce responses that will never be found in the natural setting. Such studies may be successful in showing how respondents may behave (that is, in illustrating one element in the possible repertoire of behaviors, given certain enabling and blocking/masking arrangements) but almost never show how respondents do behave in normal situations. (p. 191)

Employing naturalistic inquiry to explore the problem of how SSAOS managed college student death at small campuses allowed for a better understanding to emerge of how the research participants did behave and act in these situations. A more conventional, quantitative study would not have allowed for the level of detail, emotion, or understanding to occur as what emerged through this naturalistic inquiry.
Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research involves the examination of meanings that are applied to human or social problems by groups or individuals (Creswell, 2007). Traditional quantitative methods of inquiry do not take context into consideration (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), while qualitative research is heavily entrenched in context (Cresswell, 2007; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, quantitative research follows the tenets that only that which can be measured is real, only scientific methods produce truth, there are no alternatives to uncovering truth, and researchers do not assume responsibility for reporting truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Qualitative research, by comparison, allows for the idea that truth is “subjective and multiple” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 17). Researchers use qualitative inquiry when they want to present an understanding of a problem that is complex, described in a rich “literary, flexible style,” and do not want to separate people and context (Cresswell, 2007, p. 17). Sometimes quantitative methods and statistical analyses simply are not best suited to exploring the problem (Cresswell, 2007), because quantitative methods do not allow the research questions to be informed by “thick description” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

This qualitative study was designed to understand the experiences of SSAOs who served as primary campus responders and managed critical incidents involving student death at colleges with fewer than 5,000 students. I assumed no truths, and traditional statistical methods were simply not conducive to understanding what these experiences were like for each of the participants. Maxwell (2005) discussed the ongoing and interactive nature of the qualitative process, asserting that “It does not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps, but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (p. 3). The interactive process of an emergent narrative structure was ideal for this particular study, as the open-ended questions and follow-up questions provided avenues
for the creation of spaces for each of the SSAOs’ voices to be unique to their perspectives, yet interconnected with the voices of the other senior administrators and their experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) discussed the transformative ability of qualitative research to illuminate the world through interpretive techniques practiced by researchers who observe the world. They asserted,

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.

(p. 5)

Qualitative research was most appropriate for this type of study because the interviews allowed for the points of view, thoughts, and feelings of these SSAOs during and after incidents to emerge and develop into rich and detailed narratives and answer the research questions. Their narratives offered insights into how they prepared for student death, how they promoted healing within their communities, how they supported their staff members and students, how they were affected personally and professionally, and what they learned from their experiences. Stories about death are intriguing. Because of the intriguing nature of death, presenting the stories of SSAOs’ experiences of managing student death in a style that was more literary than clinical arguably provided a more compelling and complex set of insights into the phenomenon. A quantitative study would not have illustrated their experiences to the extent that the rich, thick description was able to accomplish.

Role of the Researcher

Informed by their own personal experiences, qualitative researchers collect data personally through immersive interaction with their research participants to better understand
both the setting and the context of the experience (Creswell, 2009). Through participants’ narratives, researchers are able to uncover, through deeper questioning, meaningful aspects of experiences in ways that are not possible through quantitative research.

In my own experiences with the college student death, I found the experiences to be challenging paradoxes of promoting community healing while feeling a sense of personal isolation. Additionally, I believe SSAOs must set aside personal feelings about the incident and the student(s) involved to focus on the community. Regardless of what has occurred, there is a job to be done, students to help, families to guide, and a community to manage. Despite the attention required by the critical incident, the daily operations of the division must continue. I viewed this study as an opportunity for senior student affairs administrators to share their experiences and offer insights as to what they learned about planning, prevention, response, and recovery from critical incidents that resulted in student death. Additionally, this was also a chance for these SSAOs to express how they dealt with managing student death both personally and professionally.

As a qualitative researcher, I examined the meanings provided by the individuals who have managed student death and analyzed the meanings in terms of their complexities, while focusing as much as possible on the views of the participants regarding the subject of the inquiry (Creswell, 2009). My dissertation committee chair and I discussed the need to avoid extensive sharing of my stories with the research participants during the interview process, but I was also aware that I needed to indicate to the participants that I, too, have encountered this situation. The participants had the immediate understanding that I could relate to this experience, and that knowledge enabled us to begin establishing the crucial trust and understanding that had to be developed throughout the course of this sensitive research. I shared this information in my invitation to participate letter.
Ponterotto (2005) suggested, “The researcher should acknowledge, describe, and ‘bracket’ his or her values, but not eliminate them” (p. 131). I expected I would have to bracket feelings I had from my own experiences, particularly some images that were quite traumatic for me from the first student death I managed. A colleague and I were in the trauma unit with a student who had suffered a severe head injury from an accident, and we were with the student at the hospital for a period of time while waiting for the family to arrive. The situation was dire, and the student was close to passing when we arrived. There are particular images and feelings involved with that incident that have become less intense as time has passed, but certain triggers can still bring them to the forefront several years later. For a very long time afterward, I had difficulty talking about this situation. Going into this study, I was not certain of how I might be affected upon hearing the stories of the research participants. I also expected that I might need to bracket the remembered feelings of isolation and frustration at what I felt to be either a lack of support from others within the institution, or well-intentioned, but inappropriate, support.

As the participants shared their experiences and feelings, I found that I did have to bracket the shared feelings of helplessness, isolation, and frustration at the lack of appropriate support and understanding experienced by the participants in various ways. I did so by focusing on their experiences and asking them to explain more expansively as to what those aspects of the experience were like for them, so that I could capture better the essence of their situations and not impose my own experiences onto those of the participants. Additionally, I refrained from acknowledging my own thoughts and feelings connected to those aspects of the experience and listened, rather than conversed, with them. I bracketed my experiences to the best of my ability, but I did not eliminate them, and my own experiences and insights aided me in weaving these narratives of my colleagues together with the compassionate care that was needed.
Once the data were collected, my role was to analyze the data and describe clearly what emerged; identify the information that was both typical and atypical within the data; illustrate any patterns, relationships, or discrepancies within the data; and ascertain that the research questions had been effectively answered (Mertler & Charles, 2008). Because of the rather sensitive nature of this research study, my role as the researcher was also to establish a sense of trust with the participants, establish a strong understanding that confidentiality would be maintained to the extent I was able to do so, and to make sure that the trust was maintained throughout the entire course of the study and beyond. In order to establish trust and rapport, clear communication with the participants about my methods and about the sensitive nature of the study was necessary, as well as making sure all of their questions were answered prior to the commencement of and throughout the study.

**Methods**

I employed an emergent design through the theoretical lens of the Crisis Management Cycle developed by Zdziarski et al., (2007). This was used to explore and ground the organic experiences related to managing critical incidents involving college student death, navigating through the personal and professional emotions and stress factors that occur, and understanding the personal and professional aspects these SSAOs found to be meaningful within their experiences.

**Pilot Study**

In preparing this research, I conducted a pilot study with a participant who has dealt with the issues surrounding college student death while serving as a senior student affairs administrator at small college campuses. The pilot study was helpful in assessing the effectiveness of the interview questions, as well as offering insight as to the depth of information that was eventually collected. Based on the analysis of that pilot study, I made adjustments to
the semi-structured interview protocol. For example, I decided to explore the role of the president more fully with my participants. I did not include this originally, because I thought question was connected too strongly to my own bias from my experiences, but when it emerged in the pilot study, I decided to explore this area further in the interviews.

**Participant Selection**

A key aspect of naturalistic research is purposive sampling (Erlandson et al., 1993). Because the qualitative researcher is not concerned with being able to generalize the findings of a study for a large population, random or representative sampling is not preferred. Instead, purposive sampling allows the researcher “to maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study” (p. 82). According to these authors, there are no rules governing purposive sampling, since qualitative research is more focused on quality and depth of information, as opposed to a large volume.

I solicited participation from SSAOs who had experienced managing college student death at a small college campus. Other criteria included that they must have been serving in a senior student affairs administrative role that had dean-level responsibilities at institutions of fewer than 5,000 students. Because death is universal, and because I was interested in how the participants experienced the student deaths they managed, I did not focus on a particular type of institution (e.g., religiously affiliated). My committee recommended at least five participants, in order to reach a point of saturation, so I searched for an initial group of five. The data began to repeat early on, and saturation occurred from the initial pool of participants. All participants were identified through referrals from colleagues. I asked colleagues if they were able to recommend potential participants who met the criteria, and through their networks, was successful in quickly finding five willing participants who fit the criteria.
After the introductory contact was made by my colleagues to confirm the interest for participation, I then made contact with the potential participants via a phone call to inquire about their interest. I met one participant during a professional meeting when we were introduced by a mutual colleague. As we discussed my study, he indicated an interest in participating. After the initial contact, potential participants for this study were then sent, via postal mail, an introductory letter (Appendix A) that introduced me as the researcher, my background and experience, as well as the type of study, the purpose and goals of the research, and the intended use of resulting information.

A main reason for this research was to provide information, through the experiences of SSAOs, for other professionals in the field of student affairs who may have to respond to college student death. This reasoning was emphasized within the letter, in order to create an educational context for the potential participants. The letter also advised potential participants of a short included questionnaire (Appendix B), asking them to return it to me in an enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

The questionnaire asked potential research participants if they had ever experienced managing student death while serving as a SSAO at a small college campus with fewer than 5,000 students. Additionally, they were asked about the length of time that they had served as a SSAO, the type(s) of student death they have encountered, their academic background, and if they would be willing to participate in a study about SSAOs’ experiences managing college student death. Upon receiving these responses from this initial pool of five potential participants, I examined the responses to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. Once this process was completed, participants were contacted to set up initial interviews at the location of their choosing.
All participants experienced the phenomenon of managing student death while serving in a senior student affairs administrative role at a small college. Small colleges were chosen because that college type was the one most familiar to me. Additionally, small campus communities tend to be closer knit than those at larger institutions and there is a difference in impact of a student death at a small campus than at a larger institution, in part because a greater percentage of people are likely to know the deceased student. Administrators also tend to have more combined responsibilities. Thus, when a SSAO is managing a critical incident involving student death, the range of normal operations and responsibilities must also continue to be addressed with fewer staff resources than might be the case at a larger institution. My interest was in focusing on how the participants managed and coped with that balance.

For this study, a senior administrative role could include vice president, dean of students, and associate or assistant dean of students’ responsibilities at the time they managed the student death. Each of these roles has dean of student responsibilities that are central to the role, regardless of other responsibilities, and those with dean of student responsibilities are likely campus responders to manage critical incidents involving student death. All five of the research participants in this study experienced the phenomenon at four-year private institutions. All efforts were made to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants by focusing on their experiences, rather than on the events. Descriptions of the institutions and of the events have been kept as general as possible to mask specific identifiable details.

All Bowling Green State University requirements for conducting human subject research were met prior to conducting any research (Appendix C). No human subject review board requirements at the SSAOs’ current institutions were required. At our initial meeting, prior to the commencement of the first interview, I provided all research participants with informed consent documents (Appendix D) that articulated the purpose of the study, the efforts at
confidentiality, the voluntary nature of the participation, and my contact information. In addition, participants were provided with the contact information of my dissertation chair.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Collection of data took place during the summer of 2014. The data were collected through two semi-structured interview sessions with each of the research participants, in a location of their choosing. All of the participants chose to meet in their offices at their institutions. The signed informed consent documents were collected from each participant on site, prior to the commencement of the interview process, and all documents were stored and maintained by me. In addition to the informed consent document, each participant was asked to complete a separate form with me at the initial interview, which included the identifying information of real names, their preferred addresses, phone numbers, emails, the names of the institutions relevant to the experienced phenomena, and the preferred aliases to be used for the study (Appendix E).

The first interviews lasted approximately an hour, but the entire first session lasted an hour and a half, with the addition of collecting the informed consent documents, selecting an alias, filling out the other relevant information, and providing the participants with local counseling resources. These resources were provided due to the sensitive nature of the research, in the event the participants experienced stressful feelings and might need to explore those feelings professionally.

Two of the second interviews were conducted via Skype and three were in person. These interviews were approximately forty minutes. The semi-structured interviews (See Appendix F) were audio recorded. Both interviews with participants were inclusive of the phases of critical incident management.
Participants were asked to share their backgrounds that prepared them for the role of senior student affairs administrator and their experiences managing critical incidents involving student death at small college campuses. Because senior student affairs administrators tend not to have similar academic and experiential backgrounds, it was helpful to understand better their points of view and how their backgrounds informed their work and responses to student death. They selected an incident they managed and we explored the aspects of how they responded to that death, the emotional that were involved, what they found to be meaningful about the experience, and how the experience affected them personally and professionally.

By asking the participants to reflect upon the incident with regard to their personal and professional recovery period from the incident, as well as how they helped their staffs, students, and campus communities recover, I hoped to better understand what personal and professional strategies they found to be useful. It was also important to understand the challenges they faced. Finally, they were asked for their recommendations for effective preparation and management of such events. Their insights may prove to be useful and helpful to other professionals who will have to manage student death situations.

Additionally, a field log was utilized to record my observations, descriptions, thoughts, and feelings. During each interview, I also documented a written account of the interview that assisted in the transcription and analysis processes. These accounts also became part of my reflexive journal.

My notations included information regarding the research participants’ mannerisms, descriptions of the location where the interviews are held, and the institutional environment, when applicable. These notes were utilized to supplement the data collected from the interviews, in order to convey a more complete and richer portrait of each of the participants. These reflections were the basis for the participant profiles.
Data Analysis Procedures

Once the data were collected, I transcribed the interviews verbatim and then read them completely. The entire transcript was then sent via email to the participant, generally within a week following the interview. All participants were asked to provide feedback on the transcript and propose suggested changes, if any, via email correspondence after both interviews as well as verify that the transcripts aligned with their intentions. Changes were minimal. All five responded after the first interview; four responded after the second interview. Additionally, we discussed the first transcriptions in person or via Skype to ensure accuracy, answer any clarification questions on either their part or mine, or discuss any questions that arose for either the participant or me from reviewing the transcript. Clarification questions and observations after the second interview were discussed via email after the second interview.

In order to ensure strong thematic framework development, I utilized the Modification of the van Kaam Method of Analysis of Data developed by Moustakas (1994). This was a type of analysis that worked well for this project, particularly the initial line-by-line analysis to help sort the information for relevance, and because it focused on meaningful moments within the experience that allow for understanding. It should be noted that in the Modified van Kaam Method, research participants are referred to as co-researchers. To remain consistent with the rest of this dissertation, I employed the term research participants, rather than co-researchers. Through this analytical method, I examined the entire transcript of each research participant and completed an initial listing and grouping process called horizontalization, in which expressions relevant to the experience were noted. This process was conducted line-by-line. Expressions were included by testing them to see if they met two requirements: the first requirement was that the expression needed to contain “a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it” (p. 121), and the second requirement was whether it was
possible to abstract and label the expression. If it were possible to do so, then this was considered a horizon of the experience.

Once the expressions passed these two requirements and were found to have been experienced by all participants, they were identified as invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). The expressions comprising the invariant constituents were clearly identifiable in the full transcription. Over the course of the two interviews, participants sometimes made more than one reference to a topic, and these invariant constituents were often grouped together to create a more complete quote about part of the experience. The invariant constituents were then compared to the complete record of each participant that was generated during the interview process. Invariant constituents were further refined during the editing and revision processes.

After the transcripts were confirmed, the invariant constituents could then be clustered and thematized as text units under a label or code (Gibbs, 2007) of the experience. The coded text units were then developed into core themes, and this allowed me to establish a thematic framework (Gibbs, 2007). As Gibbs noted, “The point is that, as far as possible, one should try to pull out from the data what is happening and not impose an interpretation based on pre-existing theory” (Gibbs, 2007, p. 46). The coding provided themes to connect the lived experiences of the participants to the phenomenon being studied. As repetitive words or ideas emerged from the data, more specific codes were collapsed into broad themes. I was conscious of the fact that the themes also needed to support answers to the research questions guiding the study. This process was refined throughout the writing and revision processes. For example, as the management processes of the various manners of death were discussed, it became apparent that specific codes about each of the main types of death in this study should be included under a broader theme, because of the unique aspects involved in each manner of death.
From the invariant constituents that were identified as compatible and relevant, an individual textural description of the experience was developed for each research participant, which included examples that were verbatim from the transcription of the interview. This description integrated the invariant textural constituents and themes pertaining to each participant. For the final two stages of this process, an individual structural description of the experience was then developed from each of the individual textural descriptions. This description incorporated the feelings of the participants and their connections to others as they related to the experience.

Next, I developed a textural structural description of the meanings and the essences of the experience, where the themes, analysis, and invariant constituents were incorporated. These textural structural descriptions were woven together under three broad themes and the subthemes within each broad theme. Finally, a composite description of these meanings, which represented the group of research participants as a whole, was developed to complete the process.

Through this analytical process, then, insights emerged what a group of people who have served as SSAOs experienced, the feelings they encountered, the types of support they received, and the coping mechanisms they employed when they had to manage student death at a small campus. Exploring these individual experiences addressed the research questions, and uncovered avenues for further potential research and conversations.

**Trustworthiness**

Research that exhibits the ethical practice of the researcher emphasizes researcher-participant relationships based on trust and respect, research findings that are co-constructed, and allows for the discovery and acknowledgement of varied perspectives to help establish trustworthiness and authenticity (Manning, 1992). For Lincoln and Guba (1985), the main concerns surrounding trustworthiness can be addressed by asking the following questions:
How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (p. 290)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) answered those questions by providing four criteria for addressing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These four criteria were utilized in this study to establish trustworthiness and are further explored in this section.

**Credibility**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985),

The implementation of the credibility criterion—the naturalist’s substitute for the conventionalist’s internal validity—becomes a twofold task: first, to carry out the inquiry in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced and, second, to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities being studied. (p. 296)

Prolonged engagement, personal observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking are all techniques used in qualitative research to increase credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, member checking and peer debriefing were the main techniques used to enhance credibility. Although personal observation would have been an incredibly interesting technique to use, this was not a realistic technique, because I would have had to be at the institution during a student death and through to the learning phase to observe the entire management cycle. Prolonged engagement refers to the time spent with participants; it was not feasible in this study. Although
the interviews generated a great deal of information, had I been able to spend extensive time with participants, I may have developed more a complex understanding of the incidents.

Shenton (2004) suggested that the focus of a member check should be “on whether the informants consider that their words match what they actually intended” (p. 68). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is the most critical way to establish credibility and is the process “whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (p. 314). A draft of the findings was sent to each participant for review. Participants were asked to review especially the sections pertaining to their established alias and provide feedback about their beliefs as to whether or not I captured the essence of their experiences, suggest any changes or clarifications, consider the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the data, and comment about the proposed thematic organization of the chapter. Participants’ feedback about the findings was provided to me via email. Four of the participants confirmed the findings and indicated their intentions had been represented accurately. One participant did not provide feedback for this chapter, but did provide feedback earlier in the process.

Debriefing with peer reviewers was also a helpful strategy to enhance credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have been working consistently with two main peer reviewers to discuss the project and writing strategy. Both are university professors and former colleagues; one holds a doctorate in higher education administration and the other holds a doctorate in sociology. The sociologist, a full professor, has spent three decades in the academic arena teaching, researching, and evaluating various types of research, including qualitative. Additionally, she has traveled the world observing people, cultures, and customs. The other colleague is an assistant professor and a graduate of a higher education administration doctoral program. He has completed several qualitative studies in the areas of admissions, advising, retention, graduate school satisfaction,
employee satisfaction, client satisfaction, client knowledge of program, and programming needs. He has been a reviewer of qualitative dissertations and studies for the last twenty years. Over the course of the study, I have met regularly with each of them to discuss theme development, organization strategies, discussion points, the answering of my research questions, and the writing itself. Suggested areas for further research was also discussed and assessed for inclusion with each of these reviewers.

The chapters were also sent to a retired former vice president for student affairs with an interest in the topic and several experiences during his career managing student death at small campuses. After his own experience as young dean of students nearly 40 years ago, he posed a question in a published article asking what student affairs administrators should do about student death. He provided feedback and suggestions throughout the study, both formally and informally, and served as the participant in the pilot study. Each of these reviewers provided an outside perspective of the research.

Rich, thick description (Creswell, 2009) was also incorporated into the final written report, in order to offer deeper insight into the findings. According to Creswell, the description allows the readers to be shown the setting where the participant is comfortable and operates. This thick description is a validity strategy for enriching the participant’s narrative and constructed reality of the phenomenon.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the qualitative researcher’s strategies for ensuring as much as possible “that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Shenton, 2004). The audit trail, triangulation, and the use of a reflexive journal are the three main strategies qualitative
researchers use to establish confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the use of a reflexive journal was the technique employed for confirmability.

I do have personal knowledge of the role itself, as well as the experience under examination, so the actual environment was not one that was new or unknown to me. My own experience as a senior student affairs administrator who has managed student death at a small college campus presented minimal challenges to the process and I have been aware throughout that my own biases could affect the validity. By employing strategies such as bracketing, the bias was reduced. I established confirmability through discussions with my peer reviewers. Additionally, I recorded my observations, thoughts, strategies for thematic organization, feedback, and suggestions, as needed, to provide spaces to work through ideas and develop themes to establish confirmability.

**Transferability**

Transferability pertains to whether or not the findings are able to hold or be transferred to other contexts or at another time using the same context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed the use of richly descriptive quotes throughout my analysis. Additionally, the methods and contextual circumstances were described. As a result of using these techniques, I was able to provide “sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible” (p. 298) for those seeking to apply the findings elsewhere.

**Dependability**

As noted by Shenton (2004), supporting dependability in qualitative research requires that “the processes within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (p. 71). The details of my methods have been described in this chapter regarding what I intended to do, and they were updated throughout the process, as needed, to describe how the study was accomplished.
Ethical Considerations

For the comfort and trust levels of the research participants, ethical considerations regarding this study had to be considered. According to Moustakas (1994), “Human science researchers are guided by the ethical principles on research with human participants” (p. 109). In order to develop trust with research participants, I needed to establish and maintain clear communication and agreements with the research participants. Discussions of confidentiality to the extent the participants required took place, and all participants were made very aware that this study was about their unique lived experiences connected to student deaths that occurred during their time serving as SSAOs at small campuses. All participants were made aware that I would be interviewing them about incidents that may have been quite stressful for them, both personally and professionally, and I assured them that their narratives would be treated with the utmost respect and care.

Each participant was asked to sign an agreement of informed consent (Appendix D) prior to the interview. I recognized there could have been hesitation involved in addressing this sensitive or difficult topic, particularly if the person was still at the same institution and suffered any environmental stress. However, the only hesitation exhibited by any of the participants was when they were discussing litigious situations and concerns they encountered as part of their experiences.

Although these are professionals who refer students and colleagues for counseling help, and are certainly aware of available resources, at the first interview, I reminded them of the employee assistance program at their institutions and provided information for their human resource departments. Additionally, I furnished each of them with a list of counseling resources located in their geographical areas. By presenting the study to the participants as an avenue for offering the potential for enlightening young professionals who aspire to become SSAOs, it was
my hope that this would aid the participant in viewing the experience through the lens of being an educator who has lived this particular professional experience.

Limitations

Although this study included various types of death, not all potential types of death were covered. None of the participants discussed a homicide, which would have involved discussions about different potential liabilities and the impact that particular type of death would have on a small campus community. Thus, a potential limitation of this study was that the inclusion of this manner of death could have illustrated what would have been different in the response, recovery, and learning phases, especially. Additionally, we may have been given insight into how working with the families would have been different, as well as measures that were taken to make the campus safer from a situation that was violent and potentially ongoing for some time after the event occurred.
CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this naturalistic inquiry was to illuminate the experiences of SSAOs who have managed and navigated student death at small campuses, in order to promote dialogues about types of support, training, and response efforts needed that will aid professionals in their planning for such critical incidents. Three main research questions served as a guide for this study: (1) How do SSAOs prepare for, respond to, and manage student death at small college campuses? (2) How do they navigate the emotions involved? and (3) What did they find to be meaningful, both personally and professionally, about this experience? Profiles of each of the participants are presented at the beginning of this chapter, which include information on their professional backgrounds, as well as information about the types of student death experiences they have encountered and managed. The major findings from the research are presented after the participant profiles. These findings emerged from two semi-structured interviews that were held with each of the participants. At the end of this chapter is a summary of the findings, and these are discussed in Chapter V.

Participant Profiles

Three women and two men participated in this study. Two of the women identified as White/Caucasian (Diana and Ellen) and one as African American (Kathleen). Both of the men identified as White/Caucasian (Michael and Ringo). All of the participants had at least a decade of experience in the field of student affairs, and the longest-serving participant had been in the field for nearly four decades. The profiles provide information about the participants and their respective academic and experiential backgrounds. After a brief overview of each participant is a story, in the participants’ own words, illustrating the experiences they chose to discuss of critical incidents they managed that involved student death. Additional background information for the participants is included in Table 1.
### Table 1. Information on Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years in student affairs</th>
<th>Years as a senior student affairs administrator</th>
<th>Number of deaths managed</th>
<th>Manners of death experienced and managed a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CA; MI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CA; S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathleen</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>CA; D; MI; S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ringo</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A; DO; MI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. aA=asphyxiation; CA=car accident; D=drowning; DO=drug overdose; MI=medical issue; S=suicide

In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, each participant selected a pseudonym. All elements that could identify the participants, the institutions, the deceased students or their families, or the events, were removed to promote the confidentiality of those involved.

**Diana**

“And some days are like diamonds, and some days are stones, like John Denver said. That day was a stone.” Fairly new to her current institution, Diana served as vice president for student affairs and dean of students. This was her first vice-presidency, but she had been in the field for 16 years. She was a pleasant, energetic woman with an engaging personality and a great deal of spirit and passion for the role, and her excitement for her new position was apparent. A first-generation college student, Diana discussed her own struggles as a student, and her appreciation for great mentors she had who helped to guide her through the experience.
Upon completion of her graduate degree, she moved on to different institution, where she earned her doctorate part-time while working in student affairs.

Diana had been responsible for managing critical incidents involving student death three times, due to accidents and illness. She discussed an accident in which two of the students were killed and the other two survived. She stated,

The one incident that I would talk about with you specifically would be, there was a car accident, and four [students] were in a car on the way to practice early in the morning, and, the college where this was, was very, very foggy, and they had to cross a highway to get from their dorm to where the practice was held, and it was probably five, between five and six. I don't know exactly what time. But when they pulled out, and the fog was so thick, literally. I remember that day really well. You couldn't see five feet in front of you. They pulled out in front of a semi, and, two of them died instantly, and two did not; two lived. It was crazy. You know, you're on call all the time, and you never think that you're going to get a call at 6 o'clock in the morning about something right down the road from your house.

So that was particularly complicated. Here they were on their way to practice. It was not far into the year. Overwhelmed. One of my fellow deans, like literally when she got the call—this is not what I did; I guess she did what I felt—but she literally, like, laid down on the floor. She just laid down on the floor and was like, "I cannot get up. This is not something I can do." And she did that. The rest of us didn't, but we all were like, "That's how we feel," like that one right there, the one that's laying on the floor, that's like, "This is insurmountable."

And to have two dead and two in critical condition—to have four students—we were lucky to have a team of four deans, so we were all really focused on different
students, and that was helpful. That's kind of how we worked it out. In other cases, in other situations, where there was one student who has died, it's not quite like that, but this one was, and there were two of us who focused on the living, and two of us who focused on the dead. I worked with both of the students who were living, and so I primarily worked with them, and I talked to them, talked to their parents, their roommates. And then, the students who passed away, I talked to their roommates and their roommates' parents.

My focus was more on the living, even taking both of the students who lived, taking them to the funerals of the ones who didn't. So, I took them and their parents, and drove them. It was not easy. And it was interesting; one of the students who passed away, her father and I ended up talking quite a bit; not really sure why, but we did. So, although we were assigned, it just, you know, personalities. It was kind of an all hands on deck, I guess, is the best way to explain it.

She discussed some of her own difficulties as a student and believes that overcoming her challenges has given her a better understanding of how to help her students.

Ringo

“\(^{\text{I think that when things first happen, you talk from a standpoint of theory, and as you have more experiences, either personally or professionally, then you talk more from experience.}}\)”

With over two decades of post-graduate experience in student affairs, and with a career deeply rooted in residence life, Ringo had been the vice chancellor and dean of student affairs at his current institution for the past four years. He had taken some time away from his doctoral program to accept his current position and get his family settled. Ringo had been responsible for directly managing critical incidents involving student death four times in his career, including drug overdoses and accidental asphyxiation. Having managed his first college student death
early in his career, he learned a great deal about the importance of learning from strong mentors, particularly during critical incidents. A professional staff member who did not do well with balancing the emotional involvement during a student death made him realize early in his career the important distinction between providing empathetic, compassionate support to those who are grieving, and not allowing one’s emotions to get in the way of job performance.

An engaging and thoughtful individual, Ringo also conveyed his commitment to his field and his work with students, particularly exhibiting a deep interest in helping students who are grieving. He viewed part of his role as a senior student affairs administrator as aiding students in their understanding of ways to normalize the grief process, by supporting natural conversations and discussions with others, as opposed to seemingly forced interactions with counselors and other professional staff members.

Ringo chose to tell of his experience dealing with a student who died from a drug overdose:

Probably the one that I’ve had the deepest involvement with is we had a student who was found in his residence hall room by his roommate in the morning when they woke up. His roommate just didn’t wake up. He had overdosed the night before on a cocktail of drugs. So dealing with not only the roommate, but also the staff of the building, the friendship network, talking with the parents, dealing long-term with the drug culture on campus.

Actually, the most ironic aspect is dealing long-term with the ethos around a room that somebody had passed away in and the students not, obviously, wanting to live there. And so, having a ghost room. Well, this happened, I think, late January-early February of the academic year, and so, we allowed it to be a ghost room for the remainder of the year, and I think, only after we had placed everybody else, we were able to put in—I
think we waited until the spring semester of the following year to place anybody in that room.

Because we were opening up at a hundred and three percent occupancy, and so, having triples, but then, having a whole room that, you know, you want to respect it, but you also understand why people wouldn’t want to live there, whether they were returning staff, or returning students, who knew the room, or if they’re new students who then hear the lore of the room. Actually, because it was an upper-class hall, at that graduation, almost half of the individuals that lived on the floor and in the building, graduated. So, from that aspect, that was a good thing.

Ringo believed he was largely responsible for creating the climate on campus through the development of strong policies and appropriate programming and resources for students. As a result of creating a supportive environment, administrators may be able to offer support to students when serious situations, such as those involving death, occur. He believed helping students to learn how to grieve “emotionally appropriately” as he termed it, by offering support, programming, and resources beyond counseling was imperative to helping them to cope with difficult situations.

Kathleen

“What can you say to a mom that’s lost her son? I mean, there’s just almost nothing you can say. So, sometimes, just being there is all you can do.” A long-term administrator at her institution, Kathleen’s campus was located in a small town surrounded by farmland. She had been in her current position of vice president for student affairs and dean of students for seven years, and had held a number of roles within student affairs at the institution over a career spanning three decades. Prior to that, she worked in residence life at one of America’s older institutions in the South, where she gained live-in experience, which she viewed as essential
preparation for her current role. She also gained experience early in her career working in admissions, student activities, and multicultural development. She had recently completed her doctorate, and she completed graduate coursework in college student personnel prior to earning a doctorate in a different academic discipline.

Kathleen possessed a welcoming and calm personality and was an engaging person to interview. Even though she had encountered student death five times over the course of her career, and had helped the graduate school with some of those deaths, she had been directly responsible for managing a critical incident involving death one time, and that had been recently. Of her experience with managing the aspects surrounding the student’s suicide, she reflected,

I was in a meeting with another vice president and with our dining service, talking about contractual issues, improvements to the dining service contract, and a staff member came down to get me to say that I needed to go to the president’s office right away. So, I had no idea what that was about. The other vice president was still sitting there. I get up, go back to my office to gather my things and go, and then, by the time I get up there, the other vice president is up there, so I see that there’s a room full of people. We’re informed that there’s rumored to have been a student death on campus, and the police are still investigating it. We don’t have all the particulars, but the president has gathered everyone—all the vice presidents, has gathered the cabinet—and a few other people: our counselor, our chaplain, the executive director of our communications and marketing staff. And I think that’s pretty much the group that was gathered. And then, they were in phone contact with the chief of police.

So, we began to learn a little bit about what they think has happened. They’re having some trouble trying to identify who the student is, so that was part of the conversation. Basically, once they identified who they thought the student was, then all
of the logistical things that needed to be done sort of started occurring to different ones at
different times. Of course, I’m like climbing the walls, because I feel like I don’t want to
be in that room. I want to be out doing something! So at one point, I do ask for
permission to step out and call my director of residence life to say, “OK, we’re gonna
need . . . because this is a student that lives on campus.” So, that’s what I did; came and
pulled staff together. We found out the name of the student they suspected.

They still hadn’t found the specifics, and so then there was discussion right before
I left the room about who would be appropriate to make contact with the parents, and I’m
thinking that it would be either the president, the chaplain, or myself, one of the three of
us. And then, at some point, we get a call that the parent, that the mother, has arrived on
campus. This is really strange, because we had not had an opportunity to call, and so I,
the director of residence life, and our counselor, who also was released from the room,
encountered the family at the apartment. They call me, so then I go over, I meet with the
mother and the grandfather. And they were on their way to campus for other reasons,
and that’s why they were here. It wasn’t because, you know, anybody had called them;
they were on their way, and just happened to arrive. Come to find out, the student
himself had contacted them, not saying that that he was contemplating this, or this was
about to occur. It was already set for them to come to campus that day, and he knew that.

So, we worked through a number of things. I met with the family, met with the
roommates, because he had three roommates. It was a male student. It was confirmed
for us by PD, and confirmed with the family, with the mother and the grandfather. It was
a student suicide. And this particular one, a firearm was involved, so that makes it even
more dramatic. From what we know, he called a friend and told them to call 911, and
said that he was going to be in a certain location. He text messaged and said this, and so,
they tried to call his phone, didn’t get any answer, called 911, and then went to try to find him. The police arrived and actually found him before [his friend] did.

The experience of managing college student death offered an insight not only into life for Kathleen, but offered a fresh perspective into the work SSAOs do daily. The suicide of this student reminded her of the fragility of life, and forced her and others to reconsider the notion that living in a small town provides a shield from some of the harsher realities of life, and of death.

Michael

“The faculty wanted to give her, her degree, and so they made arrangements for her to get her degree before she completed, and we had never done that.” A veteran in the field of student affairs for nearly four decades who had spent his career at the same institution, Michael made the choice between finishing law school and staying in the student affairs profession in the midst of a critical incident involving a student death on campus. After earning his undergraduate and graduate degrees, Michael started a professional degree program part-time while serving as a senior student affairs administrator. When the suicide of a student during a busy weekend at the institution took his attention away from an important exam, the dean of the school told him he needed to choose between his career in student affairs and his program. He chose student affairs and did not look back.

During his career as a senior student affairs administrator, he had managed fourteen student deaths at that campus, a small, private institution located near a large city. A relaxed and welcoming person, he carried his years of experience quite comfortably. He projected the combination of confidence in knowing the role so well tinged with a cautious wariness that he would never know everything there is to know. Thus, he exhibited a certain wisdom only gained
through surviving for so long in a difficult and challenging role and professional field. His office was clearly his domain, a comfortable place for when he spent time there.

The types of tragedies he had managed included suicide, car accident, drowning, and illness. The most recent of the student deaths he had managed, a student with a terminal disease, and the one he discussed primarily in this study, was one that presented personal and professional challenges. It was also one that gave him a great sense of pride in how his institution responded. A senior, who would have graduated at the end of the academic year, was diagnosed with a terminal illness in the fall semester. She continued to attend her classes via Skype, in hopes of earning her degree. When it became apparent that she might not make it to the end of the year, her faculty members wanted to grant her the degree early, and Michael was elected to have this discussion with her. It was a conversation he dreaded, because he was unsure of how aware she was of her condition. Michael had dealt with far more student deaths than any of the other participants, but this one that he chose to share presented challenges to him that were different from previous experiences he had encountered:

When I initially met her, it wasn’t terminal. She was doing a trial, but then, they dropped her from the trial, and she came back to finish. And we were working with some of her faculty members, because she had missed a lot of class. But eventually, she was hospitalized, and while in the hospital, I would go down and visit her, and she would be Skyping into her class. I mean, I would go visit her and walk into her room, and she’d be on the laptop. I’m thinking she’s just checking email, then I’d hear voices and realize she was in her class. She really wanted to finish her degree, and she was a first generation college student. The first one in her family, and so it was real critical for her, important for her, to get that degree.
We’ve always done, posthumously, a degree, and when they made the arrangements through the faculty committees, we got together, and I said, “Well, who’s gonna tell her that she has no hope left?” Because, you know, she was still hopeful that she was gonna finish that degree. So, they asked me to do that, and I would visit her often, and one time, she presented an opportunity. She had just moved to a new room, and it had an extra large little waiting room as part of the room. I commented to her about the new room, and she said she knew why she was moved. I asked her to tell me about that, and that’s when we started to talk about her death, and then, we were able to approach her about her degree.

It was right before the holidays, and the room was decorated. The pictures were beautiful. She was beautiful. We dressed her up; she got dressed in a cap and gown. The president came down. The president and I, we had four faculty from her department who marched in and did the regalia, did the ceremony like we would do for the entire graduating class. So, that’s one that sticks out to me, because of, just that whole process with her, and to help her. She passed away three weeks after that.

Just the stroke of luck in how the stars lined up that we were able to give her, her diploma before she passed away. I think that was just so unusual. And that was one I labored over for weeks of, you know, how to have that conversation with her. So I think that was what struck me the most, because she was still taking her classes online. She was still hopeful that, you know; I was confident that maybe the doctors had kind of shared with her what her prognosis was, but I didn’t know how she heard that. I wasn’t gonna be the one to have her hear it a different way. So, yeah, I kind of labored over that.
And then, just the joy of her, having her degree, and how it ended up, and all her family. It was just six of us, the four faculty, the president, and myself, and then her family and friends. It was obvious some of them had never seen a graduation, other than high school, and the pride and the joy during just a horrific time in their lives as a family.

A key distinction about his work that Michael learned to make as a result of a career that spanned nearly four decades stemmed from managing student death. He learned the difference between dealing with a tragedy and dealing with a mishap. In this role, he determined that he had dealt with countless mishaps and fourteen tragedies.

Ellen

“Our job is to help those that remain continue on. Some days are easier than others.”

Ellen began her professional career in higher education 15 years ago, starting in athletic advising, prior to deciding on a career-altering move into residence life and student affairs. She began that assignment when the position opened up abruptly. After serving as the dean of students at her current institution for a number of years, she had recently been promoted to become the vice president for student affairs and dean of students. Ellen earned her undergraduate degree in psychology prior to earning a graduate degree in counseling.

A warm and positive person, Ellen’s persona suggested one of being someone students would trust rather easily, because she was similar to the aunt one could call when a parent is being frustrating. She would be the one to say the same thing a parent would say, but the student may be more willing to listen to her guidance, because she was in a mentoring, rather than parental, role. This trait is a great one to possess for a person in a senior student affairs administrative role, as well as an effective one for gaining students’ trust.
Ellen discussed her experiences of dealing with a great deal of death in a short amount of time. Because they happened so close together, she mentioned each death, but the suicide was the death that presented the most challenges for her:

In one year, we experienced three student deaths. One was due to a car accident, and all of them actually happened when school was not in session. The first one, the car accident, was in the beginning of August, so right before classes were about to start. The second one was in January, right before the second term was beginning. And then, the third one that year was in the summer, in May. So, those three have not happened during the school year, but it was leading into the school year.

The first one, with the accident, it happened close to campus, so there was a lot of newspaper, and that’s where the institution was easily identified, and the family wanted to have the services on campus. The second one was a suicide, out of state, and the college found out because the student worked at a fast food place close to campus, and so the employees of that establishment contacted, actually, who was the student’s RA, and told the RA, and that’s how the institution found out. And the third one was a medical; the student participated in a travel athletic team, and had a medical condition. The incident occurred while he was traveling with this other team.

The first student, I knew her quite well. It was between her freshman and sophomore year, and I got to know her, because she had some unfortunate things happen to her, her freshman year, so I got to know her through that vein and kept her enrolled at the college. She was still trying to figure out what did she want to be in college, did she want to do something else, so keeping her engaged in something else, until she figured that next step out. So we had a pretty good relationship. She had a close-knit group of friends; they were small, but very close.
The second student, he was a student-athlete. I got to know him, because he was on our radar. He tended to stay by himself. Everyone on campus knew him, because he had an infectious smile. Very pleasant human being, very nice young man, but when you looked at him, you could see the weight of the world on his shoulders. So we got to know him very well and had a good relationship with him, very good relationship. But he struggled, and he never disclosed much; single mom, and I think some of those personal things is what was . . . the main things he was struggling with. Would not have ever guessed he would have taken his own life. You know, yeah, was he on our radar? Could we tell he struggled with some mental health things? Sure, but he never presented to us, or to anyone else, suicidal thoughts, behaviors, ideations. No darkness, but he was alone a lot. But he talked to people on campus. He just was friends with everybody, but never attached to one person or two people, which, you know, now, at this point, we look back and think, “Was that a missed sign?” so to speak.

The third student, he was a member of an athletic team. He was very talented athletically, as well as academically. Very pleasant young man, knew him quite well, as did everyone on campus. And even to this day, we still work with the foundation that his parents set up, to raise awareness and things like that, and our athletic department does specific things for his foundation. It was, um, a heart condition, and he had been doing well.

Reflecting upon ways she could do things differently or better after such incidents had allowed Ellen to move forward. She viewed helping students to navigate through difficult times, such as when coping with a death, as an important part of the work she did as a senior student affairs administrator. Although she admitted to questioning on occasion her readiness for the
role, or whether she could continue after such tragic events, she had realized that she also could not imagine doing anything else.

All of the participants made reference to more than one death, but each senior administrator shared more deeply about one specific event that had a strong impact on them, both personally and professionally. The participants reflected on the complexities of being in a senior administrative role, and despite the increasing challenges and the difficult situations they had encountered, all had remained committed to this field and planned to continue contributing to the field in some way in retirement, or if they resigned from their administrative roles to pursue other professional ventures.

Managing through the Critical Phases

The Crisis Management Cycle as developed by Zdziarski, Dunkel, and Rollo (2007) provided a strong theoretical frame for this dissertation, and themes emerged across all segments of the cycle, which included planning, prevention, response, recovery, and learning. The cycle is typical of crisis management cycles utilized for crisis and critical incident planning in emergency response planning nationally, and emergency management organizations as well as educational institutions plan within these cycles. Zdziarski et al. added the learning phase to the Crisis Management Cycle. Since reflection is integral to the student affairs profession, this frame was the most useful for this study.

Planning

A key insight that emerged for these senior administrators was an understanding that there was a strong possibility they would have to manage a student death at some point. Death is not a comfortable topic, but possessing a personal understanding of death and a certain level of acceptance that it is a part of life was helpful to the participants in their professional roles. The participants in this study all recognized that managing student death is among their professional
responsibilities as SSAOs. In addition, the participants indicated that ongoing appropriate planning and professional training for themselves, responders, and other professionals on campus was a necessary part of the planning process. Planning included the areas of preparation and training and personal experience.

**Preparation and Training**

Formal academic preparation about death, their own personal experiences with death, working with those who teach about or deal with death regularly, and practicing for such events were among the tools the participants used for effective management. They discussed their own personal preparation and professional training and how it was of help to them during the situations they encountered.

For Ellen, effective management of student death incidents was aided by formal education that included psychology for understanding human relations and feelings, coupled with an ability to work well with the unknown and the unpredictable aspects of the profession. She stated,

I think we see students grieving, and understanding that, and also understanding when someone is grieving, what that means to the bigger community that they’re living in, and how that can affect their living community, their academic community, those types of things, and how it may influence their identity, or where they’re at in their quest.

She indicated she was comfortable working with the unpredictability of her role and reflected on the importance for administrators to have a strong understanding of college student development as part of their preparation.

Michael discussed what he gained from his own personal preparation for managing death:
I’d encourage people that deal with this to study death and dying to understand the process, to understand people are gonna go through stages, and what those stages are, and, it’s important. I talked about experiences, but you know, I’ve read books on death and dying. I sat in on classes and went with our chaplain, when he took students to the morgue, who had never dealt with that, and kind of sat in on those conversations. You’ve gotta develop it. You’ve gotta learn it. You’ve gotta understand it.

Additionally, Michael also utilized some self-teaching and personal strategies, along with his academic preparation, to prepare for managing critical incidents. Michael discussed some of his own strategies:

There’s plenty of research out there. There’s plenty of literature. Early in my career, probably, I did more self-teaching on how to respond to things. There was a faculty member here who taught a death and dying class. I talked to him a lot about understanding the grieving process and things.

Michael indicated that he found this individual preparation to be highly useful to him in his professional role.

Kathleen echoed the sentiments of Ellen by acknowledging the importance of a counseling component in one’s preparation for the field:

I know that in traditional programs for higher ed or college student personnel there’s a component of counseling that’s part of it. If you come to this profession from other areas, though, you may not have that. I think that would be key training, just because I think that that helps you, as an individual.

Added to her belief in counseling as a strong academic component for this career, Kathleen asserted that spending time working in residence life was essential preparation. She observed, “I
don’t think that you know what the student affairs profession is really like until you’ve actually had that ‘living this’ experience, and then, you begin to see.”

In addition to preparing for student death by practicing statements with other administrators, Ringo believed that more specific practical training in the area of media relations was a key component for preparing for such events:

I think it would be beneficial for student affairs professionals to have training, like, PR, marketing training, how to talk with a reporter, or how to talk with TV cameras on them, how to deflect leading questions, you know, those sorts of things. I think that’s all something that people need to be comfortable with, so that they’re showing their true personalities, when they get on camera.

Ringo expressed more than once his belief that practicing for these events and learning from how others speak is an essential part of training and preparation.

Learning how to develop separation within one’s life was important for Diana as part of taking care of herself in this demanding field. She found this to be especially true for when student death occurred:

I think that you have to learn to divide your life. I don’t always think that a bifurcation of your life is a bad thing. I think you can make it a bad thing, but you can also do it for your self-preservation, though I think there’s good separation, and there’s bad separation, you know? And I think that you have to do that.

Although preparation is essential, oftentimes, there is simply no better teacher than experience, as indicated by this research and by the literature. The research participants concurred with this idea, acknowledging that their personal and professional experiences contributed to their abilities to manage the student death process. The participants had a high regard for the value of experience.
The Importance of Personal Experience

Having personal experience can be an asset to critical incident preparation. The wisdom gained from experience also adds to an administrator’s credibility, especially when the administrator is managing a critical incident. All of the participants acknowledged the invaluable learning and growth that only experience can bring. All of the participants discussed how gaining experience has aided them in their development as SSAOs.

Through her experience, Diana has discovered the importance of being able to understand the struggles of others and the need to be resilient when faced with challenges:

I think that you also need some life experiences that prepare you for helping people through. I think that those of us who have figured out how to be resilient can be very helpful in this field. You can say, “Well, I’ve been there, and you can get on the other side of this. I know, because I’m on the other side of it.”

She suggested that being able to have this understanding allows one to be viewed as more genuine, and people are more likely to follow a believable leader, than a naïve one.

Kathleen credited her experience in residence life as being a key factor in her preparation. She has also found from experience that good preparation involved selecting strong staff members to be part of the team.

I think that you need to prepare yourself to select the best possible staff to have around you that you can possibly have, knowing that there are certain things that it takes to be in this profession, I think, that everybody doesn’t understand, and not everybody has. It’s just really not a good fit for everybody.

She acknowledged that her staff was a great support to her following the suicide of a student, and their teamwork is what got them through that difficult situation.
Michael has found that over the course of his extensive career and having gained experience from managing 14 student deaths, his focus has shifted. He stated, “I would say, probably over time, I probably learned to focus more on my role than on my emotions, and also a feeling of there’s no need to please everyone; just please the family, and those closest.” The experience he has gained as a result of managing those deaths has helped him to redefine how he operates within his daily role. He remarked on the difference between when he was a young professional versus now, as a seasoned professional, by stating, “I think that maybe early on, the feeling of some urgency, and with experience, it’s a feeling of slowing things down a little bit.” However, the deaths he has managed have had a lingering impact as well for him, and he acknowledged, “But, you know, obviously, there’s a sadness in there; there will always be a sadness.” He indicated that he also learned to focus less on himself over the years. Instead, his focus is on others, such as his staff members, and what they are going through during critical incidents.

The importance of learning to rely on others has been something that Ellen has found to be important, as she noted, “I think that I’m compassionate. Not afraid to rely on other people, regardless of their title, their position, their age.” She also acknowledged the importance of the understanding that SSAOs will gain from their experiences of working with students who are in transition:

I think, as professionals, we know—have a good knowledge of—where students are developmentally in college, the age, the risks involved, their thrill-seeking tendencies, their decision-making, and their choices. So, I think, you take this creature of sorts, who, overnight, someone told them they were an adult, and now, they’re responsible for everything, which is a unique concept.
She asserted that it is a dangerous combination of factors when students are introduced to the unfamiliar environment of college and they are expected to know what to do and to be able to self-regulate their behaviors.

Experiences can help administrators to build confidence, particularly when the experience is gained under difficult circumstances. Ringo explained that gaining experience was invaluable for improving the necessary confidence to perform well in this type of leadership position. He stated, “There’s a rationality, there’s a tempo, to what you’re saying to somebody, and that’s what you really need as a higher ed, especially a chief student affairs officer, to learn those kinds of things.” Gaining experience was important for practical reasons with regard to planning, but the specific experience of managing a critical incident at their small campuses in which students died was valuable for what the participants learned, as well as what they appreciated about the experience.

**Protocols for Student Death**

Campus crisis plans were used as a general guide during incidents involving student death. The participants also did what they believed was right and necessary for the families involved. They also believed that there should be a certain amount of flexibility within procedures to allow for the unique circumstances that arise with each incident involving student death. Additionally, the participants discussed the need for SSAOs to infuse their professional response with thoughtfulness, compassionate guidance, and empathy.

**Following policies and procedures.** The general consensus that emerged among the participants was that strong and clear policies and procedures must be in place for effective management of critical incidents. Additionally, these policies must be widely disseminated and available to the campus community during a critical incident, but also periodically for informational purposes and preparation.
Participants discussed how consistency in managing the death must be aligned with the institution’s established procedures and policies, particularly to avoid potential legal ramifications. Diana was extremely clear that one must be careful not to allow any personal connection to an incident to alter protocol:

In any case, any emergency on campus, you really do have to follow your own protocol. You have to be very, very thoughtful, because, you know, we do live in an incredibly litigious society. Because I’m still me, regardless of who she might be. I’m still me, so I still have to handle it the same way.

Whether or not a senior student affairs administrator knew the deceased student well, consistency in the approach was cited by Diana as being imperative to avoid complications.

Participants suggested that policies and procedures should be shared with members of the campus on a regular basis so that there is a common knowledge of how to respond to student death. Like other participants, Ringo advocated for clear protocols:

There should be policies and procedures that will walk anybody through what the institution’s perspective is on how to deal with these kinds of events, and if you don’t have them, you need to write them. Doing it on the fly always feels bad, because you don’t have the benefit of insight; you’re just kind of doing it quickly.

Ringo noted that when he managed a student death from a drug overdose earlier in his career as a senior student affairs administrator, the emphasis for extensive campus crisis plans was still several years in the future:

I think this was in the early 90s, or maybe the mid-90s, and we didn’t—nobody—had crisis management plans, or at least small institutions didn’t. We had policies out there, and they kind of made me appreciate those later in my career, because it gives direction to everybody, it gives a role to everybody.
For Ringo, although student death may not occur often at small campuses, he believed it is important to have the right people in the same room to have the necessary conversations about planning and protocols.

Ellen realized she had to trust in following the policies and procedures her institution had in place in order to reduce her own anxiety levels:

I mean, it used to keep me up at night; so afraid that phone was gonna ring. And I just thought, you know, “I can’t live my life this way.” And then, taking it backwards, why am I in this profession? Why do I want to do this?

She noted that looking at why she chooses to work in this field, and why she is afraid at times is something that happens on occasion, but she reminds herself that in addition to having great people working with her, they have good policies and procedures in place that are ready if the need for them arises.

Participants acknowledged that not only does following the protocols allow for a common plan to guide a community through a challenging time, but doing so may aid in reducing litigation. They noted that awareness of potential legal issues is a necessary part of the planning process. A key avenue for creating a strong community response was to ensure academic affairs is a part of the response process and is kept informed of protocols and procedures in an ongoing manner.

**Including academic affairs and addressing faculty concerns.** Faculty members may not necessarily be as familiar as student affairs professionals with experiencing the necessary protocols and procedures of a student death, but members of the academic affairs division may be extremely helpful during such an event. The participants discussed that utilizing faculty expertise in certain academic areas, as well as the insights individual faculty members may have of the student or students involved, was extremely helpful to them during their experiences. To
help unify the community, conversing with academic affairs often allowed for a stronger and more unified overall response and recovery to a student’s death.

Michael discussed the need to make sure the appropriate colleagues are notified and included in the process and the conversations. He discovered that a good way to connect with academic affairs was to have a faculty member or advisor help with drafting a statement about the student who had passed away:

I would personally call the faculty advisor or the department chair and ask them if there’s anybody else I should call before they read a statement in the paper, or hear it on the news, from the university, about one of their students, and that’s the first time they hear about it. But also, I think with that conversation, how that individual responds, would give me some inclination as to whether they would be somebody who would be good to make a quote.

Because faculty members do not deal with student emergency situations on a regular basis in the same way that student affairs administrators do, when a student death occurs, faculty members may feel excluded. Addressing their concerns and questions was essential for the participants for keeping the community together and informed.

Kathleen discussed the difficulty she faced when some faculty members felt as though they had not been included. Additionally, Kathleen observed that the stress generated from the situation when faculty members were upset affected the smoothness of the recovery period in the aftermath of their student’s suicide. She noted, “Part of what was stressful was this feeling on the part of some faculty that they had been left in the lurch, and us needing to kind of meet that need.” She suggested that crafting a presentation for faculty and staff, pitching it to her boss, and then actually scheduling presenting it was part of how they coped with a student’s suicide.
A key idea that emerged was that planning for critical incidents where student death is involved should be continual and the community should be updated and included in the planning process as well as during an event. Awareness of what could occur and what needs to happen should something occur should be fostered on a continual basis, according to the participants. Also considered important to this planning process was a belief in strong individual and professional understanding and awareness of the issues surrounding a student death, and clearly defined roles as to the responsibilities campus community members should have with regard to the incident. This includes a clear understanding of who should be dealing with families, friends, faculty, and the media.

**Role definition and professional practice.** Role definition as an essential aspect of critical incident preparation and planning emerged from the interviews with the research participants. The importance of role definition during critical incidents involving student death was discussed as a necessary factor for effective management. In addition to having clearly defined roles, practicing those roles and maintaining a professional demeanor were important aspects of effective management. Ringo, who described himself as “calm” and “methodical” when approaching an incident, discussed the approach he takes in his role as the senior student affairs administrator, and how other roles complement his skills:

I think that, although I think I’m a very empathetic person, I think I tend to think of the lists of things I need to do. I’m a feminist. I feel like I have great perspective on humanity, I think I’m empathetic, but, I don’t always have the most broad view of how everybody’s gonna feel.

He noted that in his role, he is orchestrating the response, so he expects the counseling area to respond with strategies for addressing what people may need for their emotional health. Additionally, judicial and health services must reach out to address a potentially unhealthy
environment through education or outreach. For him, everyone has a role to play in the response.

Michael added that practice is also a necessary factor in defining roles; the planning and the approach should clearly determine who on the staff will be responsible for particular duties:

There could be a suicide attempt. Who goes to the hospital, who calls? You don’t want to be in the middle of that and say, “Can we call the parents?” I mean, you should know the answer to that. You should have practiced that. Know who’s going to make that phone call.

He recommended tabletop exercises for practice, and suggested that they should include a suicide attempt scenario, in addition to an active shooter, a hurricane, or a tornado, with specific people in specific roles.

Finally, Ringo summed up why he believed role definition was integral to his effective planning and management. For him, having clear roles also helped the student staff members to trust the leadership and allowed them to learn and grow from the experience, by also being given clear responsibilities. He stated,

I think clear roles is the best thing, especially when you’re dealing with people throughout the structure. And then, through training of all of your staff, they need to know where the policies and procedures are, so that they can quickly put their hands on it, when something happens.

Like Michael, Ringo recommended scenarios for training purposes, in addition to having conversations and round-table discussions with staff members. While the prevention of student death is not always possible, having community members trained for response may help to mitigate the stress on the campus as well as limit any potential liability risks or concerns.
Prevention

Prevention is the second phase of the crisis management cycle. Although it is desirable to hope that some types of student death, such as suicide or death from alcohol and drug abuse, may be prevented through programs and the dissemination of information to the community, all student deaths are not preventable. Because all deaths cannot be prevented, it is necessary for SSAOs to plan well for an effective response to student death and attempt to prevent critical incidents from turning into full-blown crises. Having a common understanding of liability risks and concerns was an important preventative measure that aided planning for these SSAOs. Strong planning and understanding liability risks and concerns may aid in preventing a critical incident from becoming a crisis situation.

With any situation involving students, SSAOs must have a keen awareness of liability and any potential legal ramifications that could emerge as a result of a situation. There were strong opinions among the participants regarding the need to be aware of litigious circumstances. Although understanding these circumstances was essential, balancing that awareness with the need to be compassionate and supportive to those who were grieving was challenging for these senior administrators.

Kathleen acknowledged that the profession has changed over the years, and with those changes has come an increased need for SSAOs to be aware of the potential for litigation to occur at any time, particularly when critical incidents occur:

I just feel like we’re in a more litigious kind of society. It does make you think that you can’t approach things lightly; I mean, you really need to be up on the latest in all the areas. And if your focus, then, gets so tied up in that, does that put you further and further away from the reasons that you got into a field like this?
She indicated that the potential for a situation to involve litigation does make her think differently about situations.

Diana concurred with this assessment regarding the need for understanding that American society has become much more litigious. She noted, from her own experience managing an event, “This case, and every other student death, with the exception of one student death I’ve ever experienced, personally or broadly, they all go into litigation.” She added,

I mean every school should have a good student death protocol, and in this litigious society, most do. In case of student death, who does what? Nobody talks to the media. A good plan would say nobody talks to the media, except for your PR department. No one talks to parents, except you always have one person who's really good at talking to parents, and that's who does it, or people who are good at talking to roommates.

Diana was strong in her belief that every institution should have a clear protocol specifically for student death.

One way to help ensure that more effective communication takes place and supports strong protocols and procedures is to have accurate files on students with emergency contact information and any known illnesses. Diana discussed the importance of these files by stating,

Having good student files is very important. Every student death is different, and you may know them, and you may not know them, and they may be people you love or people you really don’t, you know? You have to be able to know how to get in touch with parents or the family, at least, especially if they’re an older student.

Complete and accurate files may help to reduce liability issues for an institution and may prevent a critical incident from becoming more stressful for those who are responding. Additionally, how families are treated during a student death may make a difference in any legal action that may follow an incident. The participants were very clear in their stances throughout the study
that supporting the families involved is essential to effective management. In addition to supporting the families and students, participants found it important to involve academic affairs in their responses and address any concerns faculty members may have regarding a student death situation.

**Response**

How well administrators respond to critical incidents involving student death may have an effect not only on whether litigation is pursued, but also the recovery and healing of the community. Adjusting to what is needed specifically in response to the manner of death, possessing an awareness of cultural considerations and family dynamics, guiding with compassion while maintaining professionalism, and establishing boundaries for memorializing those who have died were key themes to emerge in relation to the response.

**Addressing the Manner of Death**

Student death, especially when it occurs on the campus property, is among the most difficult types of incidents senior administrators have to address in their roles. Suicide as a manner of death appeared to present the most challenges for the communities of the participants who dealt with suicides, due to the complexities involved and the range of feelings that were evoked. Participants discussed the importance of providing essential information regarding resources to the community, and the necessity for student staffs to be provided with the correct verbal answers to aid them if they are asked questions about the incident in question. These administrators noted that there were lists of tasks to accomplish to handle the business-related aspects of bringing a student’s file to a close when they died during their time at a collegiate institution, but acknowledged that each death had unique aspects that had to be addressed appropriately and with diplomacy.
Although addressing the manner of death was important, another key aspect to emerge was the idea that when managing a student death, focusing on the life of the student, rather than just the death, was helpful to the participants. Michael shared that a fairly immediate necessity for each incident is the need to develop an appropriate statement about the deceased student, in order to tell his or her individual story:

I get my team together. I think that, you need to, as soon as something happens, be thinking about a statement, not one of these canned statements. And then, you know, tell a story about the student in that statement. There’s a story about each one of these that you need to tell their story, and tell something unique about them, that individual.

Michael was clear in his view that if the SSAO did not know the student, it would be imperative to find someone who did.

Ringo also discussed how helpful it was for him to have general statements prepared as part of the planning process, and to practice those statements periodically during training as well as before he has to speak publicly when the situation is real:

I would figure out if there’s a way to talk with some folks, before it [student death] happens, to kind of get your mind in the right place. Kind of walk through what institutional protocols you have, talk with your police or your public safety, talk with your chaplain, talk with your president or chancellor, to find out what they want to happen in those cases.

As difficult as these incidents were, particularly on these small college campuses, the stories of the student(s) were an important part of the healing process for the participants. Additionally, providing forums where those stories could be shared was integral to helping their communities move forward from tragic situations.
Suicide. The struggle between celebrating the life of the student while being careful not to glorify the manner of death was most evident with suicide. It can be difficult for community members to see the student as a victim as they would be viewed if death occurred under other circumstances. Death by suicide had a completely different impact on the senior administrators in this study who dealt with it than other types of death they managed. The additional worry of contagion was also a unique aspect with suicide that was not necessarily connected with other types of death. Due to the controversial nature of this type of death, questions as to whether the student should be memorialized, or how that should happen, were posed to the administrators and became discussions on their campuses.

Kathleen discovered that there were a number of challenges that she and her staff had to face throughout the management of the student suicide on campus. She added,

There was a fair amount of struggle about the fact that it was suicide, not necessarily from students, but more from faculty and staff, comments about having the memorial, that we shouldn’t have it, that you know, that research says you’re not to glorify the death of someone that has taken their own life, because, you know, then this can cause contagion.

She discussed that in addition to feeling sadness at the event, there was also some fear with regard to contagion, since the student had committed suicide on campus, and she stated, “Because, obviously, contagion is real. I mean, it does happen other places, so it’s not like that was the most off-the-wall idea that anybody came up with. It was a very real possibility that could occur.”

Michael also struggled with managing the requests of the community, while attempting to focus on this issue of contagion and ensure the safety of other students who may have been
struggling. For him, paying attention to the contagion issue saved another student’s life. He described this struggle by stating,

And, you know, people wanting to jump to “We need to do this. We need to do that. You’re not doing enough. We need to have a memorial service. We need to do that,” and trying to balance that with the wishes of the family. And then, in this particular case, it was a suicide; not to glamorize the suicide.

He and his staff focused on the urgency of identifying other students who were at risk, and they did find a student who was considering suicide and had a plan in place. They were able to intervene, preventing a second suicide.

From a student affairs perspective, any type of critical incident can be turned into an opportunity for discussion to increase awareness of the topic. A suicide leads to a wide range of reactions and challenges, and while some community members were willing to engage in discussions, the discomfort caused by this type of death also led to an unwillingness, on the part of some, to have those discussions. For Ellen, the challenges presented by members of the community had to do with some of their questions and opinions, the timing of those questions, but then a later refusal by some of those community members to engage in conversations about the incident and the topic of suicide, especially. She described the frustration she felt as a result by stating, “A few people on campus and their questions; I think it was probably their timing was not good. You know, being frustrated, of course, that the young man committed suicide, the frustrations that come along with that.”

There was a range of suggestions and questions, but the participants’ main goal in managing any student death was to aid the families and the campus community in moving forward from the situation. These administrators found that there was no perfect set of answers that addressed everyone’s concerns and suggestions. Through the response to the suicide on her
campus, Kathleen attempted to address requests and suggestions from community members, work with the family, and help her staff and students.

She reflected, “I mean, I got everything from requests of final exams should be cancelled, and things like that, to we shouldn’t have this memorial service, and you try to speak to all of that. But you can’t satisfy everybody.” She was comfortable with what they determined to be the best course of action for addressing the young man’s suicide:

So, we did decide to go ahead with the service, and we did decide, we made some very intentional decisions, about not doing a big picture, or having that up there, not having a lot of imagery, or anything that would make it seem as if this person was being made a celebrity, or something like that.

She stated that they called it a time of healing and moving forward within the community, and that was their focus.

Ellen was frustrated and struggled with the knowledge that her campus had conducted extensive training and suicide prevention awareness and resources prior to the student’s suicide, and the student still made that choice:

We have trained and talked about it through residence life, through our athletic programs, coaches, faculty members; we talk about it. But I think on the other side of that, that’s what threw people off is that we do talk about it so much and about all of the resources available. Why didn’t he reach out to somebody? So that was tricky.

One of the most challenging aspects for the SSAOs was grappling with the knowledge that they had provided training, resource information, and awareness programming for their communities regarding the topic of suicide, and students still made the decisions to take their own lives, often without seeking any kind of help.
Michael concurred with this frustration and reinforced the importance of practicing scenarios, particularly with incidents involving student suicide. He had the campus police chief at his institution serve as the moderator, so that he was also tested:

We’ve practiced; I mean, we do some tabletop exercises on suicide within the student affairs division. I’ve never done a tabletop with just a student passing, but we certainly have done them on suicide, because, you know, I want to have my strategies lined up and people knowing who does the hospital, who does the residence hall, who does the sorority house? How do we come together, how do we manage acknowledging the loss of a life without glorifying the self-harm thing? We’ll throw in a twist, if they were in counseling, OK, how do we manage that?

He said his team has focused on the recovery aspect during these scenarios, including discussing what needs to be accomplished not only the first week, but the second and third week following an incident.

Because not everyone on campus is comfortable with discussions or with training for student suicide, the alarm of community members when a critical incident involving death happened was frustrating for the administrators. Suicides appeared to increase the levels of frustration and alarm. At times, the discomfort of others when student death occurred created a sense of isolation for student affairs administrators and their staffs. Ellen recognized the difficulty some may have in engaging in conversations that are more normal and typical for student affairs professionals, and the fear they may have in engaging in those discussions:

I think most people, when they’re not coming to the table, it’s because of fear, afraid to work with the unknown, afraid. These are very tragic events on a campus—anywhere—but especially on a campus, and that’s when I feel that student affairs professionals rise to the top, but also get put on an island a bit by themselves, that others tend to drift away.
She said some community members indicated they did not want to be a part of responding because they viewed it as her job or “That’s what you get to do.”

Because they were working through the situations together, the student affairs staffs of these administrators looked to each other for support, as Kathleen and her staff did in the aftermath of their student’s suicide. She stated that they did, “a lot of praying. Literally, a lot of praying. But we did have conversation amongst staff, where we could kind of, I guess, vent, for lack of a better word.” She continued, “It wasn’t really so much that we had so much to rail against, but just kind of expressing where we were, what we were feeling, the helplessness, in some ways.” For Kathleen and her staff, talking and praying together was an essential way to offer support to each other throughout the response phase. Faith was central to most of the core staff, so they drew upon their faith.

In addition to focusing on helping the staff and students who may have been struggling and addressing any community concerns, these SSAOs focused upon the needs of their student staff members. These students were in a potentially precarious space, as they came to terms with the death of a peer who were perhaps friends or residents in their halls, while they worked to help other students in conjunction with the professional staff. Ellen discussed how she and her staff focused their efforts on working with the RA of the student who committed suicide, as well as the students within the residence hall where the student resided. She and her staff set aside time for the students to just simply talk and open up about their feelings:

We were working with that community that he lived in. He lived in a traditional residence hall; it was a very close community. We had a floor meeting, initially, and then, the RA at the time wanted to facilitate the floor meeting, so we gave him that choice, and he did a wonderful job. And, the students knew by then, again, being small, they knew, but they got together, on their own a couple times, just to talk. We were
available, we had counseling services available, but they wanted to do their thing, and so we allowed it, and they would just talk.

She noted that the RA struggled for the remainder of his undergraduate experience, wondering what he may have missed, and she and her staff worked with him to help him to work through this challenge. The participants noted that the questions never really go away for anyone connected to this type of student death.

Suicidal individuals see life far differently than those who are not suicidal, and explaining this difference to students presented challenges for some of the participants. For Ellen, discussing this perception with her students was important in helping them to realize that the student who committed suicide was in a different place emotionally and mentally:

Our general response to that is we talk about people who are in that state. You know, their view of the world around them is so different, and it’s nothing that any of us could understand. If you have never felt depressed, or experienced depression or anything of that nature, you don’t understand.

She added that it is difficult to understand the mindset of someone who is suicidal, because the lens through which the person views the world is different than for those who are not suicidal.

Although suicide left some of the participants’ communities with a set of questions regarding why someone would make that choice rather than seek help and fostered feelings of guilt and other emotions in survivors, other manners of death created different challenges for administrators and their communities. Accidents did not necessarily invoke feelings of guilt in the same way as the suicides, but questions of why something like that had to happen to young people with their whole lives in front of them created some long-term issues and struggles for survivors.
**Accident.** Diana faced two interesting challenges, years apart, aiding students after the car accident where two students died and the other two students survived. The first challenge involved working with students who helped at the scene of the accident. The first responders to the scene were also students, so Diana wanted to be certain they were coping well. In addition, she and her staff worked with the RAs of the four students. She reflected,

Our director of counseling went, and then, two deans went, and we basically just said, “How are you doing? What can we do to support you,” acknowledging the gravity of the situation, and how they as students and as first responders dealt with it. So, I think that we just wanted to make sure that they knew that they had resources, because so often, you can just talk to the students who were in the scene. You don’t always get to support the people who support the scene itself.

Some administrators discovered that that grief and traumatic situations had long-term effects that appeared long after the critical incident was resolved on campus.

Diana found this additional challenge to be true when a student connected to the car accident situation exhibited disturbing behavior a few years after the incident:

You know, one of the roommates of one of the women who died got into trouble on a very different level her senior year and started talking about it then, so, it’s four years later. But I was the one she talked to then, and so I was like, “Oh...I thought you had dealt with this well, and clearly, you did not.” Which, she probably didn’t, because, you know, eighteen years old, you’re not really well-equipped to deal with trouble, with struggle, or death.

Grief might manifest itself in strange ways well after an incident has occurred. Diana learned she could not assume that the recovery process had been completed for everyone involved.
Breaks are often a time for students and campuses to look forward to time at home or travel adventures, and SSAOs and their staffs approach breaks cautiously, as students are traveling, and in their excitement or due to weather conditions or reckless drivers, they can be at a greater risk for accidents than when they are on campus. For Michael, a student killed by an intoxicated driver on Christmas Eve still invoked a tough memory several years later:

Oh, God, I remember getting called one Christmas Eve, and one of our students—you talk about the emotional toll—you think, “OK, whew, semester’s over, the holiday’s here, I’m gonna be able to just sit back and relax.” Christmas Eve, and the young man was hit by a drunk driver driving the wrong way on the interstate—a drunk driver. I can’t imagine how that family could ever celebrate Christmas again.

These incidents can take an emotional toll in a different way on senior administrators, particularly if an incident happens during a holiday season.

However, as was the case with each of the participants in this study, Michael’s resilience also allowed him to find a positive meaning within this tragic situation, as he discussed how the football team found a way to celebrate their teammate’s life, rather than mourn his death:

But for the hundred and thirty football players that played with him, that spent three hours a day with him everyday since mid-August, until late November, for them to be able to move on with their lives, to remember him as how he lived and not how he died, and to be able to honor his life, and carry that on to the next generation, who didn’t even know him, having his number retired in the program; I mean, as far as being retired, they have his number on the door, and everybody pats it on their way out the double door, and he passed away [nearly a decade] ago.
Other participants noted that sports teams, especially, seem to use the loss of a team member as a unifying factor and create symbolic gestures to commemorate the life of that student in a way that allows his or her team membership to live on years after death has occurred.

**Overdose.** Drug overdoses also caused conflicting feelings within students and administrators alike. When a student died in a residence hall room, Ringo realized that particular challenges had to be addressed immediately for the comfort level of the roommate and the other students within the building. He and his staff focused specifically on helping the roommate of the young man who had passed away in the room after overdosing:

> It was helping him, obviously, get connected with counseling, if he wanted it. I don’t even know if he utilized counseling, but then, talking to him about dealing with questions, and dealing with the added attention. He moved out of the building, which, I think, helped. It was a small campus of twelve hundred students, but it helped that he could get out of the building and move in with somebody else.

For the comfort level of students familiar with the incident where the student overdosed in his room, Ringo took the room offline as what he termed a “ghost” room for nearly a year.

With all manners of death, these SSAOs tended to increase programming to build awareness when a particular type of death occurred. In order to mitigate rumors regarding the student’s death from the drug overdose, Ringo noted that he and his team focused on increasing drug awareness on campus:

> Mostly, it was about the breadth of the prevalence of drugs in that building and on campus, and I think a lot of it was really going back to core data, you know, or other things that were more objective viewpoints of what the actual use of drugs were, and without wanting to give information about that particular situation, because that was private, and it was confidential.
When the student died as a result of a drug overdose, this manner of death fell somewhere between a suicide and an accident. Presumably, the student realized there were some dangers of great self-harm, or even possible death, but did not necessarily plan to cause harm to the point of death. Thus, Ringo and his staff focused their efforts on surviving students who may have also been engaged in similar dangerous behaviors.

**Medical conditions and terminal illnesses.** The death of a student from either a known or unknown medical condition can come as a shock, if the death is sudden, or it can be a more long-term situation if the student has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, which can take a different type of toll on those involved. SSAOs may spend a considerable amount of time at the hospital visiting with the student and the family and offering support for an extended amount of time. Two of the participants in this study dealt with student death from medical issues; one was a sudden shock and one was a longer terminal illness.

Ellen was rather philosophical about the student who passed away from a long-term and known medical condition, but it still came as a shock when he passed away during a non-campus related sports trip, especially since it was believed he had overcome his medical issues:

Initially, when he was born, it was, “You’re never gonna be active, you’re . . .” You know, all the list of you’re never gonna do anything, and he had overcome all of that and was cleared, and all of those things, and it was just, at that moment, that was it.

When these medical situations occurred, just being there for students and their families to offer support was among the most important of the actions these administrators felt they took.

Michael found that there was a difficult and delicate conversation that needed to take place when a student was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Despite his status as a long-term veteran of the field, Michael discovered how difficult this situation was for not only him, but for
faculty at his institution wanted to allow a terminally ill student to graduate early so that she could obtain her degree prior to her death. He reflected,

You know, our hope was to do it while she was still able to experience the moment, which she was. Two of the faculty were really struggling, even at the hospital, and one was just, “I don’t know if I can march out here; I don’t know if I can participate.” Sometimes, you’ve just gotta be. You don’t have to do anything, you don’t have to say anything, just be there, and I think at the end, she was glad that she was there, the faculty member.

Michael noted that patience is sometimes the best strategy a student affairs administrator can employ when dealing with a difficult situation.

Michael struggled with how to have that conversation with the dying student about graduating before the end of the academic year, because he did not wish to be the one to have to inform her that she would not make it to the actual graduation:

I just think there was divine intervention that said, “He needs a softball thrown at him.” That, and as I said earlier, there was joy in being able to see her achieve her goal before she passed away, and, obviously, there was sadness at the funeral, sadness with her family at that funeral.

Despite the challenges this situation presented to him as a professional, he was able to find joy within the sadness of this situation.

Sadness is a given, no matter what type of death is involved, when a campus loses one of their students. Although these SSAOs could not undo tragic circumstances, the participants discussed how important it was for them to learn to be prepared for anything throughout the situation, not just the manner of death. Although adjusting to the type of death was important, they also talked about how important it was for them to possess a strong and broad awareness of
potential cultural concerns and complex family dynamics. They believed not having that awareness could have complicated effective management of the incidents they experienced. Increasing awareness of issues on campus, particularly those pertaining to student death, and offering resources to the campus community not only after a student death, but regularly, was also an important aspect of the response for the participants.

**Offering Resources to the Campus**

The participants discussed the importance of offering and providing resources on a consistent basis to the campus community, in addition to during critical incidents and emergencies, as an essential part of ensuring effective incident management and mitigation of confusion on campus. Participants found that offering appropriate resources prior to critical incidents, as well as during the response, helped to reduce the stress and increase the flow of communication among constituents. Regularly promoting awareness of counseling services, distributing information pertaining to student issues such as suicide or drug and alcohol use, and promoting overall wellness are typical types of resources student affairs divisions offer to campuses.

According to Diana, “A gathering needs to take place to give them [the community] resources, to give them facts and resources. I think having something quick, immediate resources, everything that’s available, and then follow that up with something formal that recognizes them is really important.” Ringo agreed with offering resources, but warned against applying too much pressure on people to utilize certain resources before they may be ready to do so. He suggested,

We need to offer resources, but we also need to be very cognizant of that there’s no right way to grieve, that we can’t dictate to students, “Well, you need to go talk to counseling.”
You can’t dictate to a staff member that, “You should be crying.” You know, we can’t dictate that.

He noted that if a group of people does not want to attend the service, administrators should not force the issue.

The offer of counseling resources is an automatic part of the response to a student death. Although Ringo employed this method, he also worked primarily with students to help them explore other ways to process their emotions, particularly grief:

It’s the idea of normalizing death, and what I’ve found in all of these situations that I’ve dealt with, and in life as well, is that we tend to automatically say, “Well, counseling’s available.” And in reality, what we talk to them about is that it’s OK to grieve, and it’s OK to be upset. But really, what you need to do is you need to talk to people, and you need to interact, and that’s the way to normalize it, is to have conversations about it to not feel like you need to be alone and crying to be normally grieving.

Community members may need counseling later, but Ringo asserted that it is important to have conversations to figure out when counseling may be a good idea for someone, if at all.

Ringo continued by explaining his belief that as the SSAO, he has a duty to create a safe and healthy community, and to help interpret for students those events that can cause physical and emotional harm to students during the collegiate experience:

I think we have the duty, and if we’re creating a healthy community for our students—and let’s, by extension, say our staff and the faculty and administrators—so we’re creating a healthy campus community. A lot of times that means things that will develop a student, things that will address their health and safety, things that will help us communicate better and collaborate with each other.
Ringo asserted that SSAOs have an added duty in their roles to be teachers and educators during these other life events, in order to help students to move forward in healthy ways.

Kathleen and her staff attempted to mitigate the impact and the challenges generated by a student’s suicide, by offering open forums as resources to the entire campus community as a way to generate conversations. She noted, “We did eventually do a couple of open forums, where we invited faculty and staff to come and really talked about the process with this particular incident, what’s available resource-wise.” She stated that the campus counselor also sent out information to the faculty and staff on grief and possible resources for them to know.

Ringo shared his belief that college campuses tend to do a better job offering help to young people with processing the experience of death than they might receive if they were not on a campus:

I think that we deal very poorly with death in the United States as a whole, and that it’s seen as evil. Don’t say the word “cancer” out loud, you know, we speak it in only like a He Who Must Not Be Named kind of thing. We usually are very pro getting the resources that you need, so that if you need to talk to somebody, there’s people available. Although, as a whole, I think we create an environment where counseling is seen as a positive aspect of our lives.

He indicated that this is an important feature for campuses, because he did not think this positive aspect of counseling extended to the United States outside of collegiate life, in general.

Counseling services were an integral aspect of addressing the emotional needs of college students following student death, but participants also recognized that not all students were ready to seek out counseling services. Instead, these SSAOs found that offering a variety of resources to the community that allowed for sharing to take place, particularly in a group setting, was
preferred. These administrators were also often actively involved as participants within the groups and participated in sharing stories and information.

Ongoing resource distribution to increase awareness, particularly of suicide and drug and alcohol use, was important to the participants. The participants indicated that having a stronger sense of preparedness throughout the community promoted a better, more effective response overall and made the coping and recovery processes smoother. For the participants, processing the experience was challenging in some ways, both personally and professionally. For them, being able to cope effectively with their own emotions, as well as those within the community, was considered to be imperative for healing and effective recovery.

**Understanding Cultural and Racial Concerns and Family Dynamics**

Responding to a student death was stressful for those staff members who were directly involved, for the students, and for the families. The participants discussed how important it was for those who were managing the components involved not to make any assumptions regarding cultural or racial concerns or family dynamics. They acknowledged the necessity of administrators possessing both a personal and a professional cultural and racial awareness, in order to promote a sensitive and compassionate handling of the situation for all involved. Additionally, participants acknowledged the wisdom they have gained in not making any assumptions about family dynamics, so as to avoid getting caught in the middle of family issues that could have exacerbated a student death situation.

Diana discussed the difficulties that she found within the approach to addressing a critical incident where student death has occurred. She acknowledged the intricacies involved with some of the more delicate issues that can occur:

It’s hard. Everything is different. Every situation is different. Every college is different. Every set of parents is different, and you can’t assume. You have to have a general plan
that can fit all—one size fits all—but you also have to be very specific to the incident, because if the student who passes away is Muslim, for example, and they are in a place their parents would not want them to be, you have a very different grouping of things to deal with.

She reinforced that SSAOs must be sensitive to the specifics of every student, not just with regard to religious beliefs.

Diana, Ellen, and Michael all discussed potential challenges that can arise when working with the families of deceased students. Diana indicated that she learned to be aware of family dynamics and not assume anything. She noted,

Every family is different. Every family dynamic is different. It is more important to listen than to speak. You cannot make an assumption about relationships. You cannot automatically assume that the parents you are speaking to are birth parents, or they are Christian, or, I mean, you cannot make assumptions at all. You have to listen, listen, listen, and, be very slow to speak, because if you make a promise, they’ll hold you to it. And, so, you have to be slow to speak, and quick to listen, and just never make assumptions, because you never know. The closest person to that student can easily be a non-relative, and, so, I think that’s very important, too.

She noted that the closest person to a student may be a non-relative, and that is an important matter for SSAOs to take into consideration.

Ellen also discussed family dynamics and the need she felt to tread lightly when working with families who were emotionally charged. Members of the deceased student’s family began feuding among themselves, and Ellen and the administration decided it was best for the institution to simply serve as a neutral facility and not get involved with the memorial service that was conducted by the family. She stated,
With the car accident, we kind of got in the middle of a family feud. At one point, I did have to open my mouth to somebody [college employee] and say, “You know, her grandmother is this person. We need to remove ourselves quickly.” In terms of having the service on campus, and it worked out, but we just really removed ourselves, and we were just a facility in that realm.

She acknowledged that the situation was a bit tricky, but they were able to make adjustments easily as a result of being a small college.

These administrators used caution when working with families, so they did not get pulled into family dynamics that could have negative consequences. Ellen reflected on the lesson she learned about working with families:

Every family is different. The dynamics. How easily an institution can get caught in the middle of family dynamics, and I think that’s something that the next time I’m in in this kind of situation that will be, not necessarily at the forefront of my thought process, but it will be up there, in terms of how we initially respond and how we work with families, that we don’t know what we’re stepping into, and, again, still maintaining the privacy of the student, and to not get too involved in that.

She cautioned against SSAOs getting too involved, or getting their institutions too involved in family situations and maintaining a professional distance.

Unlike Diana, Michael did not hold the view that institutions can necessarily have a one size fits all aspect to these types of situations, but like both Diana and Ellen, he attested to the concept that each incident is different and has unique elements that must be addressed individually:

I think there’s not a one size does not fit it all when dealing with these. Every one of them was different, and every one, our response was different. I think the other bit of
advice is that sometimes you do these for other people, and your focus needs to be on the person. Your focus needs to be on the individual and their family.

He reiterated that the focus should be on the event at hand and the family, as opposed to the desires of the campus community.

Cultural and/or racial dynamics may need to be addressed during critical incidents, if cultural or racial differences exist between senior administrators or any staff members and the families involved. Kathleen, in particular, discussed an additional layer of awareness that she felt she needed to possess as an African American, when approaching families of other cultures, to ensure that those involved were comfortable and understood her professional role. Kathleen was the only participant who encountered or discussed this aspect of dealing with this issue, and she explained that she felt it was necessary for her to find an opportunity to make it known who she was and why she was involved:

When you first approach a family, you don’t have any idea what their thoughts about this will be, and until you’re introduced to them, or you introduce yourself to them, and they understand what your role is, you never are quite sure.

For Kathleen, focusing on the family of the student who committed suicide and creating a sense of ease meant being aware of any potential racial dynamics that could potentially impede communication or shift the focus from the situation at hand.

As one of the few African American professionals employed at her institution, Kathleen explained how she feels she must always be cognizant of this dynamic during situations that occur on campus, where she must exercise her leadership role. She stated,

There is a, like it or not, for good or for ill, there is a racial dynamic that always comes into play with me being involved in whatever the situation is here, just because I’m an African American woman. There aren’t that many African American women on campus...
that are in any kind of position, but in administration, there really aren’t very many. I’m the only African American woman on the cabinet; many places I go, I will be the only African American person in the room. It’s just kind of “part of” who I am.

Kathleen acknowledged that she has had to consider potential racial implications when she works with families, so she has made it a practice to create an opportunity early on to explain her role and her involvement in a situation. She said she has found it helpful to follow this practice, not only for her, but for others as well. For the participants, neglecting to address any potential discomfort for the families could impede communication and affect the overall management of the incident. In addition, they stressed the importance of being able to keep their own emotions in check while performing their duties.

**Managing Personal Emotions during Student Death Incidents**

For the participants, responding to student death was challenging personally as well as professionally. For them, being able to effectively manage their own emotions was necessary for being able to handle the responsibilities involved. Diana noted that emotional management is not something that is taught in a graduate program, as she acknowledged, “Because when it happens, you have to—and this is something they don't teach you—put all of your emotions behind you.” She discussed the necessity of managing her own emotions and not allowing them to become the priority during an event and instead, focusing on the issues at hand:

We all had to be very, very tasky and just part and parcel it all out so that it all got done. And it doesn't mean that you can't be emotional, because you can, but at that moment, you've got a lot of damage control to take care of. I think you have to have a really strong balance. It’s very much OK to be sad, and it’s very much OK to need support, but you also have to realize you are a supporter, so you just have to learn to deal with things.
I wouldn’t say, like, box it up and put it away and don’t ever; you just have to kind of compartmentalize your emotions for a little while. She did not recommend boxing up those emotions and never dealing with them. Instead, she indicated that SSAOs have to “compartmentalize” their emotions for a period of time.

Diana also reflected upon the additional challenge to emotional management at small institutions, when the deceased student is someone the senior administrator knows personally. She stated that at smaller institutions, SSAOs are more likely to know students than not, but they must be guided by professionalism in all cases. She explained,

On the surface, you handle everything the same, but underneath, you handle it very differently. And you know, in this field, it could go both ways, and it has for me. In this particular incident, I did not know them well. I had met both of them, but I didn’t know them, but in another instance, yeah, it was just beyond devastating, but you still had to handle it the same way, regardless.

Despite having to handle all situations in the same manner, she did note that one’s individual grief is different when one knows the student.

Like Diana, Ringo discussed the need to be able to compartmentalize one’s emotions for effective management. For him, providing necessary information to parents and families is the priority, and empathy follows once that information is shared. He stated,

I think I can compartmentalize, at the time, the emotion of who the student is, and what the situation is, different than the functionality of having to make the connection. And, if anything, my role at that time wasn’t to empathize, it was to notify, and the empathy came later. And, I mean, maybe, at the beginning, it was notification; by the end of the conversation was empathy and resource, but at that point, the parent’s not ready for empathy.
He added that parents are so shocked by the news, they just need information at that point, and they need to know where to get more necessary information.

Additionally, despite his calmness and ability to compartmentalize his emotions, he found the experience to have a “surreal” feel to it, as he went into the room shortly after the student’s body had been removed. He described how that moment stood out for him:

I think he had been taken away maybe just minutes before I got up there, and the roommate’s obvious belongings were still there and all that kind of stuff. And so, the officer and I went up there to the room, because they were gonna do a search of the room, and kind of seeing what drugs and all those kind of things. So that was surreal, because it’s that idea that there was a person who had passed away in here literally minutes before I got there. It’s surreal.

He indicated that the feeling of things being surreal was a kind of “vibe” that he got during this situation, and that was something that stood out for him.

“Surreal” was also the term utilized by Kathleen, with regard to managing the death of a student. She stated, “This student suicide has been the only one that I’ve had to deal with, and it was kind of surreal. I mean, I suppose you always know that it could happen, but never really believe that it will.” Kathleen continued by discussing the difficulty she felt in managing her own emotions as she prepared to defend her dissertation in the week following the suicide of a student:

As an aside, this was like the week before I was to defend my dissertation as well, so just add that to the mix. So I defended my dissertation and then Saturday went to that memorial service for that student in his hometown. It was . . . it was surreal. It was heavy. It was really heavy. It was hard to be fully in either moment, you know? It was really difficult to be fully either place, although it gave a perspective to both, I think. But
then, on the other hand, it was the value of life, and even being able to have these kinds of challenges and work through that, and be at a place where even though things seem dark, it’s not hope-less, you know?

Participants found that navigating their own emotions was sometimes particularly challenging during these critical incidents, and it was difficult for some to separate their personal lives from their professional roles.

The participants were rather philosophical about how they learned to manage their own emotions and reflected that their prior personal and professional experiences played a key part in how well they navigated through the emotional aspect of working with critical incident that resulted in student death. When describing how she managed her emotions during this difficult event, Kathleen stated,

In certain ways, I would say supernaturally, because I do believe it was divine. Then, the other word might be denial, because I think there was a fair amount of that going on, too. I’m telling you, and I don’t mean to make too much of this, but just the timing; that was the week before I was supposed to defend. That blew me away. It really did. I mean, when you try to relay to people what your everyday job is, and what’s going on, I mean, some of it has to sound like lunacy to them. You just press your way through and get through.

She noted that student affairs professionals must just press their way through and get through.

Michael described himself as being able to manage his emotions effectively. He stated, “Personally, I don’t have high emotional swings, or lows. I don’t ever experience lows. I don’t experience highs. My emotions are pretty even in probably all situations.” He described having dealt with loss in his own life and how he formed an ability to view situations in a more clinical manner:
And I’ve dealt with loss; I mean, I’ve lost both my parents, I’ve lost my brother-in-law, I’ve lost my godson in his twenties, so you know, I’ve had to deal with that. And my dad used to drag me to funeral homes and hospitals when I was a kid. He was a doctor. He stated that his father looked at things clinically and believed he probably adopted some of that ability, which he has found to be helpful in his role and during student death situations.

Likewise, Ellen has dealt with death and loss in her own life, and she, too, found that being able to view death in an objective manner was a positive avenue for managing her emotions when she has dealt with student death. She acknowledged,

Death doesn’t scare me. I lost my mother fairly young, and you know, other family members, but, obviously, my mother, the biggest one. I think, sometimes I have a different perspective than most, because I don’t find it paralyzing. And I think sometimes, if I say, “It’s the cycle of life, it’s how things operate,” that sounds very cold, and so I don’t like to say that, but it is the process.

Ellen stressed the need for SSAOs to be able to balance their emotions with being able to help others look forward and not get lost in the emotions of a situation.

Although she kept her emotions in check when her students died, Ellen allowed her students and staff to see her as a real person who could be empathetic; this was a form of reassurance for those who were grieving, and it helped her as well:

I’m a very real person, so my staff has seen me cry, they’ve seen me emotional, so I think I try to temper that side, but I don’t hide it from them, either, because I think that’s important that they know that I’m real, and that if I’m sitting with a student and we’re talking about this, I’m gonna tear up, I’m gonna cry, and it’s OK.
She felt comfortable with the idea that being able to cry together is all right, especially because she believed that it is reassuring to students. Ellen believed part of the role was to be able to provide that sense of comfort and safety, and the reassurance that things will be all right.

Setting aside their emotions and focusing on the tasks of a critical incident was essential to the participants for effective management of student deaths. Additionally, a combination of having a personal understanding of death and being able to expect anything was an important factor in how they managed these incidents. Part of this flexibility involved understanding family dynamics and the emotions therein. However, once the actual work with the families began, it was a source of satisfaction as they helped the families move forward. Although being able to keep their own emotions controlled when managing student deaths was essential to effective management, the participants also acknowledged the necessity of guiding with compassion while maintaining their professional roles.

**Maintaining Professionalism while Guiding with Compassion**

The participants discussed the importance of SSAOs and responders to exhibit traits such as empathy, patience, compassion, and to have a strong presence to attend to the families, the students, and to the rest of the campus community when responding to student death. Guiding with compassion while maintaining a realistic professional demeanor and moving their communities to a place of healing emerged as key elements for these participants for the effective management of critical incidents involving student death.

After managing his first student death at a fairly early point in his career, Ringo realized the importance of this particular skill set of compassionately guiding a campus community through a student death as part of this profession. He stated,

I think it reinforced that it was an event that—it was a type of event that I would need to know how to deal with. And for me, I think, just coming to terms that this is something
that is an occupational hazard of the job, and so, you need to become—comfortable is not
the right word, obviously—but you need to become comfortable dealing with that genre
of incident.

Ringo also acknowledged the necessity of striking a balance between being professional, yet
empathetic, as opposed to sounding too impersonal. He observed,

When I’ve had to call, I guess the piece of advice would be, to be empathetic, but not be
so emotional that it overwhelms their own emotions, and probably a discussion with a
colleague, where you’re talking it out. If you have access to a chaplain on campus, if you
have a good counseling staff, talk it out with them, before you call. You have to sound
confident and succinct, as opposed to have it be rehearsed. You don’t want it to sound
rehearsed.

Both Ringo and Michael also noted that how important it was to their roles to maintain a
professional demeanor under emotional circumstances and guide their staffs to do so. Ringo
stated about SSAOs,

At the time of the incident, when they’re working with their staff, when they’re working
with students, when they’re working with the parents, they’re the voice of the institution.
That’s not the time and the place for them to share their emotions in a problematic way.

Additionally, Michael discussed his strategy for leading when disasters happen at the national
level. He reflected,

I would look at it from a perspective of I have a role, and my role is part of this process,
and if I don’t keep that role, then it will be harder for others to heal. I remember when
9/11 happened, and I got the whole staff together, and I said, “You know, we have to lead
in this situation, and if we fall apart, then our students are gonna fall apart.”
Michael stated that because his father was in the medical profession, he looks at death in a more clinical, rather than an emotional, way, as others might.

Even though Ellen and Kathleen were clear in their roles as the senior student affairs administrator in charge of the overall management, like the other participants, they also recognized the importance of the team effort for effective critical incident management. For the participants, part of being an effective professional is allowing for the human element to emerge at times and relying on other professionals. This display may help to provide comfort and support for staff members and students. For Ellen, being able to rely on her team reduced her feeling of being overwhelmed:

I feel I’m constantly doing a tabletop exercise, and sometimes, that can become overwhelming, because I see where we can be vulnerable, or there’s times where I feel like I have frozen. I can’t, I don’t feel like I should approach it where it’s always up to me. Yes, I am the senior administrator; however, I’m human. It doesn’t matter your title; it’s who’s there first, whose skill set meets the need of the situation at hand.

She stated that it is essentially developing incident command training. While she understands that her role is to pull everything together and lead her staff through the response and the recovery, she acknowledged that she needs others to help her to accomplish that.

Kathleen echoed the idea that team members were able to offer support for one another as needed:

I mean, it really was the team effort that brought me and the rest of us through. That was really the most important thing about it, I think, to be able to pull from the strengths of all of the different staff members. You know, where one may be weak, the other was strong there, and that was a way for us to sort of navigate and guide the group through.
She maintained that what got her through the situation was her core belief in teamwork and her team’s effort.

From Michael’s perspective, institutions have focused increasingly on risk management and less on approaching situations from a standpoint of care and compassion, and he considered this to be detrimental. He believed too much focus on risk management could reduce compassionate care. He stated,

I think sometimes institutions approach a student loss, especially given the circumstances, from a risk management standpoint. When you do that, you’re gonna get yourself in trouble. It should be an approach from compassion, care, and concern, and let the other chips fall where they are. If the university had some responsibility, then take that responsibility, but I think your initial response should be from compassion.

Michael reflected upon this struggle between compassionate guidance and managing risk, and after spending nearly four decades in student affairs, for him, it came down to a rather basic humanistic point of decency:

I’ve read legal cases where the university was so concerned about risk management, you know, how they granted family access to the room, or what they did here, or what they did there. You just need to step back and say, “Would I want to be treated like that?”

The participants acknowledged that neglecting to use compassionate guidance could contribute to making an already difficult situation even more challenging for the entire community, and for the family or families involved. However, they also recognized that appropriate boundaries must be established with regard to remembering those who died.

**Establishing Boundaries for Memorializing**

Part of the aftermath of a critical incident involving student death is to appropriately memorialize the student or students involved with a commemoration. A wide range of emotions
may be involved, and senior administrators must guide the campus and the families through those emotional waters. These SSAOs found themselves fielding requests to cancel classes, name buildings, hold memorial services and vigils, and sponsor memorial events in the aftermath of critical incidents involving student death. They had to manage debates about how to celebrate the lives of students who committed suicide, without glorifying the manner of death. Requests came from all constituent groups, and SSAOs are often the administrators who must establish boundaries and instill fairness and consistency within the memorialization. There are immediate types of memorials, such as gatherings to bring the community together, and SSAOs are often part of planning and coordination of what potential long-term memorials might look like. Sometimes, they must help to establish boundaries between the desires of the campus community and the wishes of the parents and families of the deceased with regard to memorialization.

The participants were firm in their collective belief that memorializing must be fair and consistent with institutional policy and practice, while allowing for flexibility in amending or adding to policies and practices. They discussed the wide range of requests and ideas that were proposed by both internal and external constituents, and they remained firm in the core belief that the family wishes, within reason, should take priority and be respected. Additionally, the participants were most supportive of memorial events that celebrated the life of the student(s), rather than those that focused upon mourning and grieving. For example, Ringo said:

If the parents don’t want a memorial service, that trumps the students wanting a memorial service. But it’s up to us to be good role models and not make a memorial service seem like a burden to the family, to the institution. And so, I think from that aspect, I think we are almost better on a college campus, in that we usually try to have a celebration.
If the event is not exactly a celebration, he said that they will have some type of memorial in order to bring the community together.

Empowering students and being inclusive and supportive of their ideas for memorializing a lost peer emerged as an important consideration for the participants. In response to the suicide on Kathleen’s campus, the students had a number of ideas for ways to honor the student’s memory. She stated,

And we didn’t want to plan it for the students, because there were some students that were very close to this particular student, so what we wanted to do was get that student input, and we did begin to do that. The students had wanted to do something that would help raise funds to help the family, and they wanted to plan that, so we planned that for a little bit later in the spring, and we met a couple of times to kind of help them through the process, to see what they needed.

In this instance, they planned a dinner and raffle with some other games and sole shirts with the student’s name on them, because they wanted the memorial to be something that was a fun remembrance.

Sometimes, even with the best of intentions, ideas may not always work out as planned, but including the families and inviting them to attend any memorial events was something each of these administrators did as part of their practice. For Kathleen, supporting her students in their plans was an important part of the process:

They wanted to end with a ceremony outside where you have those lanterns that you light, that float. Of course, [the town] is like rarely still and calm enough wind-wise to have anything like that work, so, of course, it did not. Still, it was the thought that counts.
What begins as a memorial on campus can evolve and become a campus tradition, particularly if the student(s) had a specific organization affiliation. Diana noted that a new tradition for the team, of which the four students involved in the car accident were a part, emerged from the initial memorialization:

It was an intersection on campus. Now, they have a memorial at the location where the accident happened. Fewer and fewer people go, but the coach has one every year, and it’s more of in honor of the team now, because nobody on the team any more knew them. But it’s the idea of it now. It’s more to symbolize the unity of a team. He’s a pretty remarkable guy, the coach is.

This tradition has continued for nearly a decade, and Diana was impressed and pleased that this had become a tradition for that campus.

Eventually, the institution’s development office may take over connecting with the families. This transition allows an institution to maintain a connection and establish memorial events that create partnerships and allow for new positive memories to be created from circumstances that were once grounded in sadness. Michael discussed how a memorialization in the form of a 5K race for a student had expanded to connect his high school community and his college community:

This race that’s going on, our development office worked with the families. So, they’re going to have shirts that everybody that knew him from high school will have that color shirt, and then, college—everybody will have a shirt, so they’ll have a chance to see the different phases of his life, the different people that impacted his life.

Michael indicated that he, too, planned to participate in the event and was looking forward to it.
The participants tried to ensure that memorialization remained consistent with campus practice and appropriately commemorated the students’ lives. Ellen discussed the choice that was made for the student who took his own life and why that option was selected:

We’re gonna get a picnic bench, because he liked to sit; just kind of off to the side, not on a traditional path, but off to the side. You know, just something subtle that those that know, will know what it is. Because the other topic that came up on campus was what do we do in terms of remembering, memorializing, because the student that was killed in the car accident, her grandmother wanted to plant a tree on campus, and so, kind of regulating that. But we felt badly trying to regulate those types of things. But we can’t just have random objects placed on campuses.

Finding an appropriate type of memorial and working with families can be a delicate balancing act for senior administrators. However, memorializing can also be a vehicle for increasing awareness and fostering conversations within the community, such as when a suicide occurs.

Discussions may also focus on establishing memorials that are inclusive of all student deaths that have occurred or may occur in the future. At Ellen’s institution, there were discussions about creating a memorial garden with a fountain that could be maintained through memorial donations. However, when a student death is controversial, such as with a suicide, actions may never go beyond the discussion stage. Ellen found this out regarding the student who committed suicide:

A few people thought we don’t want to draw attention to the suicide, and I posed the question, “Why is that any different?” We need to talk about that. We saw a number of, not just individual personal beliefs, but religious beliefs, come from that. I think that’s, for our campus, something that’s still a topic. We never really came to a conclusion there, and we may never.
Members of a campus community may hold strong beliefs about suicide, but may not always be willing to engage in conversations when a death is controversial.

Ellen continued to advocate for a physical memorial, despite the hesitancy on the part of some to have discussions. Having a physical memorial as a tribute to a student’s life can aid those who are left after that student’s death. She explained,

But I think it’s part of the coming up with an idea, the concreteness. I think it helps people *process*, because it’s *concrete*. They can *see* it. It’s a reminder. It’s *real*, where those that just have the thoughts and the memories—some people struggle with that—and they need something more physical to pay tribute and what have you.

It was also important to these SSAOS to promote the idea that memorials hold different meanings for everyone, and memorials in the form of physical reminders can be incredibly important on a campus, not only for the survivors of a particular incident, but for survivors of similar incidents who may connect with the memorial in the future. In addition to covering a student’s death, the media may cover or promote memorialization events, so it is important for institutions to have a strong working relationship with media sources.

**Working with the Media**

An inevitable aspect of managing a college student death involves working with the media. Each of the participants acknowledged that they did not necessarily have to manage the media component directly during these events; in fact, they all avoided getting involved in this part of critical incident management, unless asked to do so by the public relations department. However, they also knew they had to understand how to handle the media and how to aid students if the media requested to speak to them. Establishing a strong ongoing relationship with media sources can be helpful when critical incidents happen, because positive relations may prevent possible embarrassing coverage.
Michael was a bit skeptical of the media’s willingness to be compassionate toward a student death situation as well as toward surviving students. He shared concerns about sensationalism, by stating,

What I’ve learned with the media is they may tell you they’re concerned about the individual, they may tell you they’ll be as compassionate as possible, they may tell you that they want to tell their story, but the bottom line is, it’s news, and they want to report the news. If they can sensationalize the news, they will sensationalize the news.

He made it clear that he does not dissuade students from talking to the media, but he also makes it clear that he will handle the media, if they do not wish to talk to a reporter. He added, “So, what I’ve learned with the media is that I’ve learned to tell students they don’t need to talk to the media, and that we will handle that, but they’re free to talk to the media.”

Likewise, Ringo did not dissuade students from talking to the media, but offered various options to them if they did not choose to speak to the media. He acknowledged,

Happily, it wasn’t really an issue at all. Getting everybody on board to talk about funneling questions and funneling the answers through the PR department, public relations department, talking about free speech, so that there’s a fine line between an RA talking in the role that he has, and the RA having the freedom of speech to talk as a student.

He also trained his staffs, especially the student staff, to make sure they understood the balance of responsibility with being a paraprofessional staff member as well as a student.

Like Michael, Diana was skeptical of the media with regard to sensationalism. She was the most adamant of the participants in her view of refraining from getting involved in any kind of media sensationalism while managing a critical incident, especially one involving student death. She stated,
I think media outlets are always into sensationalism, and, the easiest way to get your president to fire you is to feed into the media frenzy. That is going to make the college look bad. That is the easiest way to lose your job. When a young person dies, it’s sensational. It’s interesting. People want to hear about it, but you need to leave that to the people who do that for a living.

She reiterated her belief that those who are used to handling such media situations should be the ones commenting, and those who do not have those responsibilities should stay out of it.

For Kathleen, working with the media was not an issue, because her campus had a strong and clear policy with regard to media contact.

We have a pretty strict policy here. Communications and Marketing deals with the media. That’s come through a long history. It helps a great deal, and just mentally, where you need to be, so that you don’t say one wrong thing that can set off a media firestorm.

Neither Kathleen nor any of her staff members spoke with the media at any point throughout the critical incident involving a student’s suicide. Other participants indicated that they had not spoken to the media when they managed student death, either.

Because the three student deaths happened off campus and during various times of the year when students were not fully on campus due to breaks, Ellen also did not have to work with the media. She did, however, reflect that when she has watched news stories of critical incidents, she has considered what her own message would be as a way to be prepared:

With our situations, we didn’t—because the way they happened, I believe, and the locations and timing—have to interact with the media on their terms. We were able to drive that, in terms of information on our website, internal communication, communication that was put into our alumni magazine, so to speak, so we had control.
over those pieces. I’ve not had to manage that aspect, but that is of concern. That’s one of those things that’s always playing through in my head, when I’m watching things on TV.

She noted that at her institution, a member of the public relations department or the vice president for institutional advancement would be the primary contact with the media during such an event.

The participants believed that institutions should have strong relationships with the media on an everyday basis, so that when a critical incident occurs, particularly where student death is involved, well-established partnerships may allow for less invasive reporting to happen. Sensationalism during an already stressful event can invoke strong negative feelings and be hurtful to those involved. Preparing for how they will approach incidents involving student death was not an easy task for these SSAOs.

In addition to establishing strong working relationships with media sources, part of this preparation also included the more practical tasks of distributing resources appropriately during a critical incident. However, the participants also suggested that administrators should find a way to send resource information to the community periodically and in a consistent manner. The participants believed that strong preparation and preventative measures can increase the effectiveness of the response and prevent an incident involving student death from becoming even more critical.

**Recovery**

Once the immediacy of the critical incident has been addressed, and required tasks have been completed, the recovery process can begin. The recovery phase is a time for people to process the emotions they have been experiencing, attempt to settle back into a more normal routine, and find ways to move forward from the critical incident and the death of a community
Healing and Restoring the Community

Once the immediate issues involved in the response were addressed or resolved, the recovery process started and healing and restoration of the community began. Participants discussed challenges they encountered helping the community heal, support and care of staff responders and students, and self-care and coping with the phenomenon.

Managing the community. Student deaths generate many challenges for SSAOs and other primary campus responders. Some of the challenges are professional; others pose personal challenges for responders. Managing the community, with various requests, suggestions, and emotional reactions, was considered by the participants to be among the most difficult challenges. Attempting to address concerns and requests, while ensuring the smooth operation of areas not affected by the critical incident, tested the patience of even the most experienced participants. Additionally, maintaining one’s professional demeanor while attempting to instill a sense of emotional balance within one’s self and among the members of the campus community can be an additional complexity within the situation. Through these challenges, the participants served as guides who attempted to offer compassionate care to those who were struggling, while working through the practical aspects that had to be addressed.

From his first of fourteen incidents, Michael learned about the challenges of managing the community while managing the death of a student on campus. He learned from a strong mentor what to say and how to say what needed to be said during such events, and he stated,

But I think the other thing that I learned from that experience—and that was my first time, and I was dean of students, but I was reporting to a vice president, and she was very good; she had great instincts—was that a lot of your challenges in dealing with the death
of a student is managing the community. So, yeah, the management of that, and also to
tell grieving people that are not family or friends that we just need to wait. Let’s find out
what the family wants to do.

In addition, he learned about the challenges of managing the community and he considered that
to be among the toughest challenges SSAOs face when these incidents occur.

Michael also had this view confirmed by his associate dean at a later time, when she was
the main person managing the initial response to a student death, while he was away from the
campus:

When I got back, she said exactly what I felt a hundred times ago: the challenge isn’t
dealing with the family of the deceased or the close friends; it’s dealing with everybody
on the periphery. And that’s the challenge. People that hardly know think that you
should be doing more. People are ready to start, you know, memorial services, and
naming buildings, and doing stuff like that, and they just don’t think of the family and the
grief they’re going through, and the time that they’re going to need to heal.

Managing the community can be a delicate task for administrators. For example, a sense of
tension generated by the faculty members who want more resources and guidance than they
normally might want from student affairs can be an additional and unexpected challenge for
student affairs administrators.

As a result of this tension, these SSAOs felt as though they had to adopt the role of
mediator in the situations, in order to strike a balance between addressing faculty requests and
helping faculty members to understand what student affairs deals with on a regular basis.

Kathleen described this particular challenge she faced after a student’s suicide:

There was discussion about bringing in someone, but I felt like it was really important at
that moment that faculty be aware of the resources that we had within our own staff. I
think that request from the faculty was one that I felt like, that was, in a way, kind of a, well, I guess a mild power struggle, and in some ways, it seemed like it was self-serving to step up, but I still felt like it was important enough that I did.

She wanted those within academic affairs who were questioning things to realize that student issues are ongoing for student affairs professionals, and that they are always working on these kinds of issues involving students.

Because not everyone on campus is affected by a student’s death, the lack of awareness on the part of some members of the campus community, while not their fault, was sometimes a source of frustration for the participants. Maintaining normal operations presented some participants with challenges that were different than dealing with those who wished to be overly involved. Diana found that she was frustrated during the situation by those who were not part of the situation. For her, a difficult part was dealing with “Life going on.” She continued,

Here we have sets of grieving parents and students and all of this, and you still have the student who comes in and thinks their life is gonna be over, because their roommate leaves their socks on the floor. You just want to look at them and say, “Are you serious? Really? This is your problem?” Because life keeps rolling on, and that’s true with any source of loss, or grieving. Life continues, and roommate issues will continue.

She commented that she was not certain that she was as patient as she should have been under the circumstances. She found herself very frustrated by what she thought were mundane issues.

When student death occurred, Diana was concerned about making sure she was creating a good balance of support and space for her students to cope with the situation. She reflected,

If students are dealing with it well, you don’t want to be in their face. But if students aren’t doing well, you don’t want to be absent. So, that balance of how do you support them and meet them where they are, and when you’re eighteen and somebody you’ve
lived with for two months dies, you may handle it one way one day, and completely
differently another day.

Being able to provide a sense of balance and support was essential to managing the community,
particularly when it came to students who were affected by the incident.

If a staff member becomes overwhelmed by the emotions of the situation, his or her
ability to handle the situation effectively may be reduced, and this may increase the stress for the
SSAO. This was a particular challenge for Ringo, when a professional staff member became too
captured emotionally in the situation, and could not maintain a professional composure:

The empathy was really getting in the way, and so, where I think a good counselor will
remain objective, and weave in empathy where it’s appropriate, this person was
empathetic to where it was almost—narcissistic is probably too big of a word—but, self-
focused. Well, because she was emotionally invested in the situation to an inappropriate
degree, she had to step back from the situation. And that causes stress for me, because
then, you can’t rely on a staff member, because their emotions are getting the better of

He described the additional stress this caused for him to have this staff member’s behavior
become an obstacle in the situation by not having a full staff to help with the response to a
student’s death.

For Ellen, the challenge was dealing with an extraordinary number of deaths within a
short period of time, with the additional loss of a young alumna and the serious accident of an
alumnus, and the toll that number of deaths took on her, her staff, and the rest of the community:

And so, it all happened in eleven months, and so, I think, that year, we all kind of just
wandered. I think we were just dealing with things at the time, and then, any sort of
reflection, it hit us all at different times in different ways, but I think, last year is when it really hit people of what we had experienced the previous year.

When there are multiple deaths within a short time span, those events may have long-lasting effects and may resurface months later. The participants learned they needed to be aware that issues and stress-related concerns could resurface months later, well-beyond the events, once the community had time to process what had occurred.

**Supporting staff responders and students.** All of the participants discussed specific ways they tried to aid their grieving students and staff members who were primary responders; in some cases, the student-staff intersection led to a need for additional or more specific support. Simply providing opportunities for sharing stories and listening to what others are feeling was a simple, but highly effective strategy participants used for supporting community members and helping them to cope with student death.

By helping students to face death realistically, student affairs administrators can help young people cope with death beyond their initial encounter with it. Ringo discussed the need for those managing these situations to understand the traditional-aged college student population, especially when they are coping with death for perhaps the first time. He stated,

> And so, it’s really how you’re setting up that whole chain of how they’re gonna understand all those and process all those. Because if you think about it, if they set up, and they view the first death *negatively*, and horrific, and they don’t get that, and they’re alone in their room, and they’re grieving, and they don’t know where to go or what to do. He indicated that if students experience death negatively, it could affect how they might view the next deaths in their lives.

Diana discussed how she simply listened to people to talk if they needed to talk, or kept them busy if they were not ready to talk:
If they needed the time, to take the time, and if they didn’t need the time, give them the work. It was a time for everybody to feel like they had a purpose or had a place, and you need that, but you need that especially when you’re kind of in the crucible of it all.

These administrators strived for a balanced approach, by providing open opportunities for community members, particularly students, to talk and share their feelings, but also providing outlets for times when action was preferred over talking.

Michael concurred with the idea that talking with students after a student death was a special part of the healing process. He shared how effective meeting with students in a classroom was:

And then, I think with students, especially in the classroom, once you get them telling stories, it seems to be a healing process. God, they tell some great stories, and they start to laugh, then they start to cry. That’s OK, too. They sometimes will get me to cry, and that’s not so bad for them to see me tear up about somebody I hardly knew. But they tell some great stories there, and I like to hear those.

Not only did the process of sharing stories help his students, but it was a source of support for him as he processed the situation as well. By hearing the stories students told him about their friend, he was able to develop a more detailed portrait of the student’s life, rather than just focusing on the death.

Ellen and her staff got together with students to talk about the incident after a student committed suicide, and they attempted to help students understand why someone would make the choice to commit suicide. She stated:

So we tried to approach it in, “Think about how you can’t imagine not doing things with your friends, or your family, or just going about your business. Think about something that takes that away from you, or that stops you.” And they seemed to understand it. The
amount that have had experience with those with suicidal thoughts is very common. So, I think that helps, in terms of explaining.

An aspect that may be overlooked in critical incident planning and management is how the primary responders will be relieved and how the affected staff will be supported beyond the response phase. Ellen discussed the need for critical incident management involving student death to have policies or procedures in place that provide relief for the SSAOs, their staffs, and other primary responders at some point in the process:

I think part of the policy, or procedure, or manual, whatever—student death—that the other section in there is about how are you gonna take care of the professional staff members? Who else gets involved in that process? Is that other vice presidents? Is that the counseling center?

She asserted that whatever plan is put into place at an institution should fit with the needs of the individual campus, but she was adamant that a plan for relief needs to be included.

Leading staff and students through the grieving process requires compassionate guidance, and sometimes, listening to what students and staff members were experiencing was one of the most effective ways the participants offered support and aided in their coping. These SSAOs were the main source of support in a small campus environment when a student death occurred. However, when such incidents occurred, the rest of the campus operations still had to continue, and attempting to address normal campus situations while managing an intense and challenging incident was quite stressful for the participants. With their focus on supporting others, self-care and coping with their own emotions were low priorities.

Coping and self-care. Managing a student death stretched the mental, physical, and emotional limits of the administrators as they attempted to juggle all of the responsibilities involved. Each of the participants discussed the issue of self-care and coping with the
phenomenon of managing college student death from the perspective of physical actions they have taken to manage their thoughts and feelings effectively. Additionally, the participants also discussed ways in which they mentally, emotionally, and spiritually reflected on their experiences, in order to process the situation, as well as their feelings about the situation. For all of the participants, talking with others was a key coping mechanism.

Diana described the exhaustion she experienced during the management of the incident involving four students in which two died. She was one of two participants who talked about her religious faith as being a factor in helping her to work through the management of the event. She reflected,

I was really tired. It’s so exhausting, so exhausting. I think that is always important and probably a lot with how people deal with grief is their own beliefs of what happens after death. And for me, I was really tired, but I wasn’t like, “Oh, my God, did they go into nothingness, or did they go to a higher state of being?” I feel pretty grounded about what I feel happens. And so there wasn’t a lot of questioning that, so that’s probably one reason I was able to kind of process it.

Describing herself as an external processor, Diana was extremely open about working with a therapist and maintaining access to one to help her process her thoughts and feelings whenever she felt the need to do so. She acknowledged that she openly shares her view on counseling with her students:

I think having a therapist; that’s important. It’s been more important to me during certain points of my life than others. I didn’t particularly need my therapist during this event, but I knew I had one, if I needed, that’s always helpful to have in your pocket. I always say all my friends who are counselors, have counselors. I think, you know, kind of two outlets: one is having really good colleagues to lean on, and then, I’m a firm believer in
counseling. I’m really open about it. I mean, I tell students all the time that I think counseling is a good idea, because I use one.

In addition to having a therapist or key confidants with whom one can express feelings, physical exercise and paying attention to health and wellness was essential to the participants for self-care and coping. For Ringo, physical activity was a self-care strategy he used to aid in his coping and maintain his overall wellness. Additionally, he also had key people he trusted to provide necessary support. He stated,

I run, and that’s a stress reliever. I think also talking, having one or two people on campus that you can talk to about it, in a professional, but somewhat non-professional way as a release. So having somebody that you can, and that might be your partner as well, having those kind of outlets is a way that I kind of de-stress from these situations. While not wishing to appear glib, he also acknowledged that he has found it important and helpful just to simply see what is going right, rather than wrong, in the world.

Exercise was also cited by Michael as a main coping mechanism, as was seeking support from colleagues, and making sure his team was well prepared to deal critical incidents through practice. He acknowledged,

Well, I’m up at five-fifteen and in the gym by six, so, I do that often. I do that a lot. I mean, I think you need to take care of yourself. You know, our approach to crisis is a team approach, and so, I seek the advice from my colleagues, and we’ve worked together for some time. We’ve practiced, we do tabletop exercises.

He said that he and his staff figures out together how they would approach a student death, such as a suicide, and how they would respond to the situation as a team.

Ellen and Kathleen both discussed the importance of being able to rely on their partners to provide a perspective to the situation that falls outside the realm of higher education and
student affairs. Both found this type of perspective to be helpful in achieving a sense of balance for their situations. Ellen stated that she focused on the following:

   Tried to balance in terms of giving myself my own time. Talking it out with, actually, my spouse, who does not work in higher ed, thinks higher ed is an interesting being in and of itself, let alone student affairs. But he was very helpful in that he just listened, and he’s a human being, and so he provided that perspective of bringing me back to kind of out of the politics that come with everyone’s opinions, thoughts; bringing it back to the human side, the refocusing, and reminding me I can’t always fix everything for everybody.

Ellen also indicated that she tried to create a balance by giving herself her own time to work through things.

   For Kathleen, the support and understanding of her spouse has offered her a sense of balance. She stated,

   I have a very supportive husband, so, and he’s used to, first of all, not knowing when I will be home, and then, secondly, when I come home, not knowing what the heck kind of mood I will be in, or what has occurred during the time when he last saw me and when he came back. So, that helps a lot. Anything can happen. And he can be asked to do anything, and he knows that, so he’s ready to be a part of the team, too!

As noted earlier, Diana worked with a therapist, when needed, but she also found key people on campus who were the best confidential sources to help her with the verbal processing. For her, it may not always be her therapist; it may be a colleague or, as the others noted, a partner, depending upon the needs of the situation. She reflected,

   I have to process. I’m a verbal processor, so, for me, it’s important to talk to friends, talk to colleagues, talk to the therapist, to process it externally. So, I guess that’s my coping
mechanism. Now, in every situation, you have to find who is the most confidential and reliable source for that, and so, I guess, it just depends on the situation.

Similar to Ellen and Kathleen, Diana also processed the situation with her partner and her fellow deans. All of the participants also discussed personal traits, abilities, reflections, and ways they mentally take breaks from stressful situations such as the critical incidents that have resulted in student death.

Being able to create a sense of distance between one’s professional self and one’s personal self was essential for these senior administrators during these types of situations. These administrators discussed the importance of developing strategies to facilitate this separation. This can be a difficult task at times. Michael discussed his ability to maintain a calm and even sense of emotional balance, as well as a general ability to leave some things at work at the end of the day. He also discussed the effects stress can induce when coping with a critical incident involving student death:

Somebody asked me, “How long does it take you to wind down when you go on vacation? How many days?” I said, “About half a mile from campus.” I’ve just had that ability to do that, so, you know, certainly, taking care of yourself physically is important. I think being more prepared, as opposed to reacting. I like to spend time with people. I like to reflect; I live about a 30-minute drive from campus, so sitting in a car is a great time for reflection, thinking through how we would handle things. But you know, I think the coping’s a lot easier if you’re prepared for it, and that you have a team together that can kind of respond as a group.

He admitted that he does, indeed, get stressed out at times, and has recognized that when he has dealt with some of these situations, within a few days he has had terrible colds and backaches in the aftermath.
Having an awareness of how other professions cope with critical incidents and death can be useful in better understanding how to cope with such issues in student affairs. Michael has learned some key strategies from working with law enforcement. He stated,

I think I’m a pretty calm person. I’m probably, emotionally, I’m pretty even-keeled. Don’t have highs, don’t have lows. I do think of it more strategically. Plan for the worst. It’s interesting, I observed when I moved into this position about twenty years ago, campus security reported to me. Then, we transitioned to a police department over that time, and I observed how police deal with it, and I mean, they practice, practice, practice. They talk about it. They provide support services for their officers. They have an interesting way of approaching crisis.

Spirituality and personal faith was also an avenue for self-care and coping. Like Diana, part of Kathleen’s ability to cope with the student’s suicide was due to her spiritual and religious faith. She stated,

I guess it would be important to know that I’m a Christian, and that my faith is really very important to me, and so, it’s a very key part of who I am and how I operate. So, I think, in times like these, that’s a way for me to be centered, and that’s a way for me, I guess, to have unmet needs met, maybe whatever other needs that might otherwise go unmet. That’s kind of my worldview, and that helps me. Also, I guess, people look for ways to be useful or to be helpful, and I think everybody does, because you feel helpless when there’s something like this.

Kathleen recognized that people look for ways to be useful or helpful when situations like this occur, because there is a feeling of helplessness. For her, finding ways to be helpful was part of her coping strategy.
Diana added that she found that taking a real break at some point after the situation was resolved was healthy. She stated,

If you do have an event like that, take a real vacation somewhere that is not conference-related. Taking time off to do time off things, and turning off your phone, that’s hard as a senior administrator, you know? There are only a few times in your life that you can actually turn off your phone. So that’s kind of a big thing I always support.  

She has found it helpful when she has been able to do this.

There were general responsibilities that had to be accomplished that are common to all student death situations, such as closing accounts and caring for the community. Just as these SSAOs provided time away for their staff members, they also found that they, too, needed some time away. Additionally, emotions must be processed at some point, and the participants often found that the support provided by their colleagues was among the most helpful to them.

**Processing emotions and collegial support.** Processing emotions, particularly with the help of colleagues, was integral to the management of emotions for the SSAOs. Other primary responders on their staffs or senior administrators at other institutions were the ones from whom they received support. Others on campus simply did not have the ability to empathize in the same way, if they were not part of managing the student death. The participants reflected upon the various ways they were challenged by their own emotions, as well as the emotional issues faced by others who were experiencing the event. In addition, the participants discussed ways they learned to personally process the emotions they experienced as a result of having to manage a student’s death.

Ringo acknowledged that part of what students, especially, experienced emotionally during a student death was simply life happening, and they needed to figure out how to cope with those emotions as part of being an adult.
Ringo also asserted that helping students through these situations in a realistic way is part of the educational process, on occasion, and aids students in developing their life skills:

While it’s cruel, and it’s harsh, it’s also giving the message to them, that it’s kind of normal, and that, you know, be happy, live life for what it is, and those kind of things, because this stuff’s gonna happen, and you need to figure out the coping mechanisms that go along with that. It’s part of the tool kit that you want somebody to graduate with. An unfortunate tool kit, I suppose, but it is part of the natural process.

Helping students to comprehend that death is a natural aspect of life may not always be a role that is comfortable for SSAOs, but the participants believed that it was vital and oftentimes, rewarding.

Managing the response to the death of a college student was sometimes stressful for these primary campus responders as they worked through the details of the event. Getting together informally to talk, share food, or just spend time together, and sometimes apart, were effective ways the participants found to provide and receive support. Ellen discussed strategies she employed throughout the management of the event with her staff to keep them motivated and moving forward. She stated,

I just think it depends, with being a small campus, there’s small groups of us that get together, and we talk about, reminisce, or just talk about ways and what we could do better, because it was a lot that particular year. I sent people home, just from a practical, humanistic side, just because they needed to be away. They were having a bad day, a bad whatever, and being here wasn’t what they needed.

As a staff, they found that sharing food provided comfort. Additionally, Ellen tried to help her staff and students create a balance between having enough time alone to process their feelings and not spending too much time alone, particularly the students.
Similarly, Kathleen discussed the important role her colleagues played in helping her to process her emotions, as she reflected,

It really was our staff, in particular the director of residence life, the chaplain, and the director of counseling. I mean, everybody, right away, all of our staff responded and wanted to know how they could be helpful, what they could do. But those central players that I named were, from the word Go were there, were on task, on the spot right away. She stated that she could not imagine what it would have been like to navigate this incident without her staff or being able to talk with them about her feelings.

Ellen also described operating through that year of multiple deaths as being on “autopilot” for quite a while, through to the following fall semester. As she reflected on that challenging year, she continued,

You know, and, I think, looking back, there was a point where I didn’t realize they all had happened within that same year, until somebody else said it, and I was like, “Wait a minute. No.” You know, I had to really think about it and count it out, and I was like, “Holy Smokes!” Time was irrelevant.

She discussed receiving support from her colleagues, in particular, by stating,

I think, from the director of residence life, as well as our director of counseling services, we would kind of check in with one another regularly, and you know, talk it out, or just know that there’s an understanding, if it was a good day, bad day, or something in between.

As difficult as that year was, she said she worked through it by continually moving forward.

When asked about his sources of support, Michael’s answer was simple: “My colleagues.” Colleagues have been a main source of support for Michael, some within his
institution, and some outside of the institution, when he has felt the need to maintain his composure more in front of his staff and not rely on them for support. He stated,

I spent a lot of time with our chaplain during those crises. We spend time together. And I think my colleagues at other schools; you know, there’s kind of a network there of friends that’ll call you. I will do that, when I see somebody, if I see they have a loss, I’ll call my colleague over there and just chat with him, and he’ll do the same for me, and offer some support, help, and things like that. More just a sounding board, because, I think, sometimes VPs, they can talk to a VP at another school easier than they can talk to their staff, because they’ve gotta keep up a front with their own staff.

Michael said he has noticed that senior administrators do not communicate and connect externally with other professionals as much as they once did. He argued that this collegiality used to occur much more, and he believed it was a positive way for professionals to connect and support each other.

The participants acknowledge the need, for them as leaders, to support the professional and student staff responders, especially. Additionally, these administrators discussed the importance of self-care and how grateful they were for the ability to be able to process their emotions with their staff members. All of the participants found collegial support to be among the most important aspects of coping with this experience.

Addressing Other Duties Assigned Through the Experience

A feature that is often found within job descriptions for positions in student affairs-related areas is the phrase, *Other Duties as Assigned*. These duties run the gamut of responsibility, and are assigned by the supervisor of the position, as needed. Professionals often joke about this phrase, particularly because student affairs professionals are called upon to take care of concerns that others would find odd at best, strangely bizarre, and sometimes, quite
stressful. The research participants learned they were not immune to being assigned “other duties” during critical incidents involving student death. Each of the participants described challenging duties that were assigned to them through the circumstances of the experience itself that were not easy to accomplish.

Packing up the belongings of a student who has passed away is a sad task that is often completed by the staff or by the staff with the parents and family involved. Ellen and Diana shared their experience of completing this other duty assigned to them as a result of the situation. Ellen described the experience of packing up the room of the student who had committed suicide as being “surreal.” She stated,

The director of residence life and I packed the student’s belongings. I mean, I’ve packed up students’ rooms for various reasons, but that one was just very cold. So we packed everything nicely up, and he had a large, big carpet in his room, and so we had folded that up, and we stored it. And we went to his services, and we told mom, whenever she was ready, we would keep the belongings, until she was ready, whenever that day may come. It was on a weekend, and we met her and helped her load everything, and the carpet, she didn’t want. I’m not sure what the emotional attachment was with the carpet, but there was something with that carpet.

Likewise, Diana described how she generally finds the task of packing up a room as one that gives her purpose, but found packing up the belongings of students killed in a car accident especially difficult:

I always seem to be the one that helps pack up the room. That was hard. I’ve done that several times. I’ve done it for students who did not die, but were severely hurt. I don’t know; it makes me feel useful. It’s something to do. You feel purposeful, and a lot of times during student death, you don’t feel purposeful, and, I think that’s why people get
angry, or discouraged, or sad, or whatever. But, yeah, that’s one thing you can always do.

Similar to what Kathleen acknowledged earlier, finding a way to be useful or helpful was important to Diana in a situation that could not be fixed.

When their students died, the participants indicated that they, as well as the parents, learned a great deal about the life of the student who has passed. However, sometimes what was learned about a student’s life was disturbing and difficult for the families. Ringo also dealt with another student death from a drug overdose at a different and slightly larger institution, and discussed a strange duty he had to undertake that involved an aspect of the student’s life that was unrelated to his death:

The second one, I had to inform the parent that his son had passed away. I met with the police when they sat down with the parent and interviewed them, because there was the thought that the student had not only OD’ed, but they also had—unrelated—he had what could have been considered bomb-making materials in his apartment. There was an added oddity to the whole situation, and so, sitting down with the parent while he’s being interviewed, the dad, while he was being interviewed by the police about the bomb-making stuff.

One thing Ringo did to make a stressful addition to a student’s overdose less tense for the father was to hold the meeting with the police on campus in his office, in order to make the situation as personal as possible.

Kathleen and some of her staff members were present to offer support when the mother of the student who committed suicide read aloud to his campus friends the letters he wrote to all of them prior to his death:
We were actually there at the time when the mother opened the letters and started reading about what he said, and I think that was the point at which I felt the most grief. It was just so heavy. It was just like, “I’m not sure I can take another word. I don’t even know if I can handle hearing any more.” She read it out loud. She was reading to some of the students that were his friends that were just trying to make sense of, “How could this happen? We just went out last night.”

Kathleen also discussed another task that was assigned to her through the situation that had to do with closing the student’s financial account and had an awkward component:

There was another interesting piece to all this, which was the student’s loan debt, which was an odd piece to kind of be a recurrent theme, but in this particular case, that student had a grandparent that had co-signed on a loan. And so that became a point of interest for several of the family members, not so much the grandfather himself, although I did have one conversation with him about it, but us trying to figure out what could be done, to help with that particular situation.

Even though addressing the business aspect of student death was rather antithetical for these SSAOs to the normal work they do, there were details in closing out a student’s account that had to be addressed and finalized. These were important tasks, so that families would not be contacted with awkward and hurtful reminders from the institution for notices regarding payments, upcoming events, or alumni donation requests.

Delivering bad news is part of the daily work within the role for SSAOs. However, death notification is different than delivering other types of unfortunate news. The issue of death notification and having to deliver tragic news to others is one of the most difficult other duties a senior student affairs administrator can be assigned to do during a situation. Through her experiences, Ellen learned that she is capable of delivering such news. She reflected, “I can
deliver horrible, life-changing news to others. I can find my words, and it’s very hard. It’s about being there. I think, when I’m trying to help students or others through things, I hope I’m helping myself reaffirm.” She also described another difficult, but very rewarding, task, which was go with a student to the visitation and explaining what that first-time experience would be like:

Experiencing going to a service with a student that’s never been, and being that person with them, that, I think that was hard, and they’d never been to a calling hours. So I think that was one of the most unique things, but reinforcing that I was proud of them for doing it. You know, and I was glad to be there with them. It’s one of those parts of the job that no one said, “This is in your job description to do.”

She discussed feeling a sense of satisfaction and importance in being able to share that part of the experience with the student and serve as a guide for that student through difficult and new circumstances. Her feelings echoed those of Ringo, when he discussed viewing his mentoring role in this type of situation as providing students with tools to put into their life skills toolkit.

The other duties assigned following a student’s death were quite challenging for these administrators. However, these duties often ended up being among the most significant areas of support for the families that the SSAOs provided. These duties required a combination of compassion, flexibility, and a willingness to venture into uncomfortable spaces in order to support those who are coping with some level of trauma.

**Learning**

A main area of focus of the learning phase is to examine what worked really well during a critical incident, and what positives can be taken from how things were managed. Additionally, reflection on components of the incident that needed to be stronger or managed better also takes place during this post-recovery phase. The participants shared their lasting
impressions about what they learned, both personally and professionally. They discussed the importance of working well with parents and families when a student death occurs. Additionally, they shared what they came to understand about leadership challenges and opportunities related to managing critical incidents involving student death and acknowledged the need for institutional support, offered insights into the role of the president, and reflected upon the positive outcomes and sources of satisfaction they recognized as a part of their learning process.

**Lasting Impressions of the Experience**

Just as the participants discovered meaningful aspects within student death incidents, they each also have shared with others what they learned from these incidents. Ringo discovered that he had experiences similar to those of professionals from other fields. He stated,

> It’s kind of sad, but just recently, the police and I were having a discussion, and the police were saying, “Hey, we have to come out to the scene where we have dead bodies, and we have to deal with, you know, really hard situations,” and I think I was able to come back and say, “Well, you know what, I mean, here’s four situations that I’ve had to deal with that seem pretty close to the angst and the emotion and the personal toll that you’re talking about.”

Ringo felt that the police officers in question did not consider the role of a SSAO to be one that dealt with difficult situations such as the police handle. Managing student death provided Ringo with an opportunity to reflect upon the serious aspects of the role and share that reflection with others. Similarly, Diana found that having to deal with such a difficult situation as student death gave her a different perspective about her role as a senior administrator, as it impressed upon her just how serious the role can be at times.
The death of student can have a resounding effect upon those who respond to and manage the components connected to the event. Kathleen discussed this by stating,

It’s definitely had a lasting impact. As you prepare to go into a new school year, in some ways, it’s with fear and trepidation, because you know that somewhere along the road, there are gonna be bumps and bruises, and you hope, “Not another student death on campus.” But you don’t know, you don’t have that assurance, so I think it’s forever changed all of us. The director of residence life and I talk about this—we can be back there in a second, and feel the emotion that we felt at that point.

Kathleen and her staff were still processing the student’s suicide a few months after the incident.

Michael reflected on the mixture of emotions generated by student death. He found being able to aid families and students in moving forward from a sad circumstance to find closure and something meaningful to be an important part of his role:

Well, I think it’s a combination of joy and sadness, you know? I think that in all of them, there is a kind of sadness at the loss of a young life with so much potential. Circumstances affect each one differently, but there’s obviously that sadness. I think there’s a sense of relief that you can help people move forward from this. For the family, that’s gonna be a defining moment. Because, I think, there’s some gratitude about seeing that happen and understanding how resilient people are, and how they can move on.

For these responders, being able to find aspects that were meaningful were important parts of sorting through the complex emotions generated by the lasting effects of their students’ deaths.

Ellen discussed the lasting impact of being able to help surviving students through such a tragic event to be meaningful, as she reflected,

I think being able to experience something like that with a young person—and sometimes, that’s the first time they’ve experienced death—is something unique and
something special. I think that bonds you together, but it’s also very important, and it’s not something you can read, or learn. It’s just something, kind of on-the-job training.

In addition to helping the families move forward, working with students who were struggling to find some meaningful understanding helped these administrators to find something meaningful in the midst of what felt like senseless tragedies. The participants did not necessarily find grief to be meaningful; rather, what they found to be meaningful was helping others to process what had happened. Additionally, the participants acknowledged that student death creates lasting impressions that are both personal and professional.

**Personal impact.** Participants shared the personal impact managing college student death had on them. They addressed their own emotional reactions, increased their awareness and confidence, and processing the experience as a parent and considering their own children. Having to manage the death of a student led participants to reassess ways they work with students. Michael developed greater patience through the numerous student deaths he has encountered. He stated,

> I’ve always felt I was a patient person, but in some of these situations, I found I need to be even more patient. And, by nature, I think a lot of us in this role are built to fix things, and sometimes, you can’t fix things. You just need to let things play out. You just need to be there. You don’t have to say the word that’s gonna make a family feel better; just the fact that you’re there.

Although managing emotions is essential to effective critical incident management, Ellen found dealing with three student deaths in short time period tested her ability to separate her emotions from her work:
It was a good test of my ability to manage my own emotions with I have a job I have to do, and balance the business side of things with the non-business side; you know, making tough phone calls and being sensitive, but also being the point of communication. Additionally, she acknowledged that the experience “reinforced and reminded me how important my work is, that I’m never too busy to talk to a student.”

However, participants were not always clear how or if they had changed personally. Having a deeper awareness of policies and procedures was a clear answer for Diana about professional changes, but when she considered the impact of the event on her personally, she was ambiguous. She stated,

I don’t know that I’ve changed as a person. I think everything you do changes you, most for the better, some for the worst. It probably gave me some more confidence, which is kind of an interesting thing to get from it.

Like Diana, Ringo became more reflective when considering the personal impact of managing student death. Also like Diana, Ringo acknowledged gaining more confidence. He realized, “You need to be prepared for these kinds of events, through messages that you’ve pre-written, or talking with your staff.” When asked if he believed the experience had changed him, he stated, “The quick answer is ‘No.’” However, he added, “I think I’ve probably become a stronger professional because of it, and it’s given me the confidence to deal with lots of situations.”

Whether or not the institution has a religious affiliation, managing student death can have a personal impact that is spiritual for those who believe in a higher power. Kathleen reflected,

If I looked at it objectively, without faith, there were any number of times that something—obviously, this was a tragedy—this was something that was very tragic, very sad; in some ways, like your worst nightmare realized. But it really isn’t about you, because it isn’t your nightmare. I mean, I wasn’t that mom. That’s that mom’s worst
nightmare, you know? It just kind of reinforced for me there is a God, and there’s a plan, and you may not understand how this is working together or going to work out, but it will, you know, according to that plan.

Separating the personal from the professional was not an easy assignment, particularly for these participants, who have all worked in student affairs at small campuses for many years. The personal and the professional aspects of the role were often interconnected for the participants, as were the impacts of student deaths. After nearly four decades at his institution, Michael found himself unable to separate the personal from the professional impact of student death, because he viewed the two as being so intertwined:

I think with any passing of a person, I think your immediate thought is how they died, what the circumstances were. But I think, with time, you begin to think more about how they lived, and their experiences as an individual. So, they become part of who I am. With some of these folks, and what their experiences were, and their stories—as you can tell, I like to tell their stories—and you learn from what happened.

Although the personal and the professional can be intertwined, there were definite ways SSAOs felt the impact personally of student death experiences, such as when they considered their own children.

The participants who had children of their own faced additional emotional challenges that had to be addressed and processed when they handled the details of a student death. This mixture of emotions had to be separated and processed, which was more difficult in cases where the administrator knew the deceased student personally. Diana discussed managing a student death from the perspective of being a parent herself, as well as the challenges involved when a senior administrator knows the student:
So it is very sad, but I think in the same way, I mean, if it is a student that you know well, you deal with it very differently than a student you don’t know well. If it’s a student you know well, you deal with the personal grief. If it’s a student you don’t know well, you deal with kind of the idea of it as grief. You grieve the idea of it.

She acknowledged that there is always a part of it, on some levels, that SSAOs must suppress, especially when they have children of their own, such as thinking that it could have been their child, someone they cared about, or even themselves. In addition, SSAOs must be able to balance the personal impact of the situation with the professional impact.

**Professional impact.** There was also a professional impact that held meaning for all of the participants. They discussed how the experience affected changes and updates in protocols. Additionally, they reflected upon how they helped other constituents to understand student affairs differently by challenging their assumptions. Also included in their thoughts were how they faced issues of professional uncertainty, and how they planned for their work with students differently as a result of experiencing the phenomenon.

Managing student death increased the administrators’ awareness of policy and procedural effectiveness and need for better preparation. Diana and Ringo both indicated that their professional awareness of procedure deepened as a result of managing student death. Ringo described a frustrating conversation he had with a police officer after a drug use and drug deal situation on campus. The officer seemed to be suggesting that student affairs staff members did not quite understand the gravity of what drugs can do and were allowing this to happen, since they did not have to deal with dead bodies like police officers do.

He shared with the officer some of the similarities student affairs administrators share with other first responders and discussed how his experiences had a beneficial impact:
So, as a benefit, I guess, of *my* experience, I was able to counter that, and *really*, I think, give him some perspective, as well as a piece of my mind, that having dealt with at least four, but also a vast array of having to tell people that their son or daughter is on their way to the hospital or those kind of things, or attempted suicide. I think, I *hope*, that he realized, one, the myopic view of his statements, but also the ignorance of what myself and my staff has to go through as well. To *that* benefit, my experience was a positive, I think.

Ringo was frustrated with the officer, because he was “making the assumptive comments that we, in student affairs, don’t understand that perspective, and that we lack a deep-felt, emotional, *visceral* response that the police somehow have over us.”

Tragic situations, especially, cause responders within higher education institutions to assess what could have been done differently, if anything, and what was done well. For Diana, the experience created a deeper professional awareness of policies. She noted, “I’m working on a policy here, right now, at this institution, and it’s a 23-page document that we are working very hard on, but *if* we’re lucky, we’ll never use it.” She added,

So, one thing I’ve really learned is the importance for protocol, even if you don’t think you’ll ever use it. So, you need to have a protocol in the case of a student death, even if you never use it. That’s something that I really learned the importance of, because it’s similar to your grieving. You need to have a will in place, because when you’re grieving, if you don’t have a protocol, you’ll get lost in the weeds and lost in the minutiae. It’s very important, protocol and procedure.

The professional impact of such events can be long lasting, as they may lead to changes in policy and practice. The stronger the protocols, the better the response should be.
Additionally, once a student death occurs, the concern that another incident may occur caused these administrators to think and operate differently when working with students. For Diana, the experience with the four students involved in the car accident caused her to consider differently how she works with students. She said of this struggle, “Any time you experience a loss, regardless of what it is, when you go into that next situation, you’re always thinking about that loss, and trying not to project, but it’s hard not to.” When she meets with a new group of first year students, she has found that she cannot help but think about who may be affected by a negative situation over the course of the upcoming year.

Institutions may not know where plans or procedures need to be strengthened until an incident occurs and the procedures are put into action. Kathleen discussed how a student’s suicide caused her to view crisis management and planning differently. She reflected,

So, it meant for me, that there are some things that we should shore up. One of them is aftercare of the staff itself, I think. It did highlight for me, too, that we probably need to be a little bit more visible with faculty and staff just on a regular basis, as far as what’s available, so that they know.

She indicated that she and her staff were working on developing new ways to work with faculty, especially, to make critical incident preparedness communication more seamless.

Critical incidents where death, particularly suicide, occurs can make those within the community wonder if something more could have been done to prevent a tragic situation. Although managing such an event may increase one’s personal confidence in being able to handle serious situations effectively, as some of the participants noted, the professional confidence may also be shaken in some ways. Kathleen discussed struggling with this issue by stating, “And then, I suppose there are times, questions that I had, just about the way I was approaching things. That was maybe questioning my own confidence level, I guess.”
She explained that she felt confident in how she handled working with the family and her students, but faculty being upset reduced her professional confidence about managing the death. In addition, she also discussed dealing with the thought of the next time always being present in some way:

But as far as the fear, there’s always that uncertainty, I guess. So, I guess, it’s less fear than it is uncertainty right now, because you just don’t know what new challenges the new year’s gonna bring, but I think we go into it, or I go into it now, with eyes opened a little bit wider.

She believed that this uncertainty happens every time a new challenge occurs that needs to be addressed. Kathleen felt that her institution did what they were supposed to do when they enacted the plan in response to a student’s suicide on campus, except the provision of aftercare for the staff. That was a key area that she felt was not addressed appropriately and where she planned to reinforce in future planning.

As others noted, Michael also described how his experiences altered his work with students as well as how he interprets incidents:

I’m a lot more patient, I mean, I am a lot more patient when it comes to student misbehavior and mischief. When you have students streaking across the football field at homecoming, you think the sky is falling, but when you’ve dealt with one of these situations, and you think, “OK, that’s a mishap.”

Managing student death challenged the participants to plan differently, but at times, the personal and the professional intertwine, so professional changes are influenced by personal understandings, and vice versa. Michael explained how he considers his personal and professional changes to be interconnected and how he interpreted this connection:
My personal changes are my professional changes. Probably the same thing I said earlier; I’ve learned the difference between a mishap and a tragedy. I mean, I see that in my personal life and my professional life. If the VP for finance says, “I don’t feel comfortable signing a contract,” that I’ve worked on for five months, that’s a mishap. I may be pissed about it, but it’s a mishap. That’s not a tragedy. So, yeah, probably personally, I’m more patient, but also, I think probably has made me a better listener and a better observer.

Because the small campus community can be quite close and a student death may affect a significant portion of the community, these senior administrators who responded to such events found that their personal and professional roles and lives often intertwined. There were times when it was difficult for them to discern whether they have been personally or professionally affected by an incident, or both.

Just as other participants have discussed how their experiences with student death affected how they work with students, Ellen also talked about how the experience of dealing with a student’s suicide especially affected the ways in which she addresses and talks with students in her current role. She reflected, “It has changed how I talk with students, because that’s in the back of my mind.”

Despite the challenges involved in managing three student deaths within a year’s time, the personal and professional impact these events had on Ellen were not negative. Rather, they only deepened her commitment to her profession. She stated,

I’m a lifer. I can’t imagine doing anything else. I just can’t imagine doing anything else. I see myself working in student affairs forever. How important it is, and what an impact it has. You know, helping people and experiencing the journey with them is just wonderful, and seeing that end product, and the human piece of it is just awesome.
Seeing the growth, working through the challenging times, figuring it out together, there’s nothing more rewarding, for me, than to see that.

For Ellen, this human piece of helping people with this journey is what keeps her in the field, because there is always a need. She considers herself to be fortunate for having this role to aid students as they experience their journeys.

Although each of the participants found the experience of managing student death to be challenging and stressful, they all were able to find a sense of valuable meaning, and the events only seemed to deepen their sense of purpose in their work. None of the participants discussed feeling that having to manage the death of a student was a deterrent to wanting to continue in their roles as SSAOs. Rather, the experience seemed to strengthen their resolve. Additionally, these participants plan to pursue various avenues in the future after they retire from their positions, including teaching, motivational speaking, writing, and wellness services. In each case, their plans seemed to suggest a continued connection with student affairs in some aspect. This ability to adapt skills to different situations was a key trait for this group of senior student affairs administrators. When student death occurred, other duties emerged that generally fell to these senior administrators and their staffs, and the ability to fulfill these duties had a strong impact on the overall outcome of the situation. Additionally, managing student death also provided for the participants a different understanding of the leadership challenges and opportunities that emerged not only for them but for others as well.

**Working with Parents and Families**

Each of the participants discussed how important and meaningful working with the families of the deceased students was for them. The participants discussed their connections and their work with the families more thoroughly than they did their work with their students or any
other constituents. Participants felt compassionate guidance was integral to helping families navigate these situations. Michael reflected:

You know, you expect to lose an old person, you expect to bury your parents. You never expect to bury your child. People will say what they think are very meaningful things, and they’re not. With the family, you know, you just show compassion, care, and I think, sometimes, like I said, you just need to be there.

The participants concurred that simply being present is the most important thing a senior student affairs administrator can do to help a grieving family.

Ringo commented on the importance of being there and offering help and support to parents in a smooth and timely fashion. He noted that when working with families, “Usually, it’s providing as much information as you can, and then not making any promises, and saying, ‘Here’s where to go to get more information.’” He also added that it has been important in his role to be the main point of contact and ensure that families did not get shuffled between offices:

I think with talking with the parents, it was more being the main contact for them, so that they didn’t have to deal with multiple offices on campus, and that there was one voice about picking up belongings, or talking with the right police officer, or dealing with the city, those sorts of things, that it became much more of a functional standpoint. I think they want information, and if you do have to follow up with them, you need to do it quickly. There’s somewhat of an expectation that hours should go by, but not days.

He reiterated that administrators should exhibit a balanced empathy and that being overly emotional can be problematic in these situations.

Attendance by these SSAOs, their staff members, and other campus representatives at memorial services in students’ hometowns made a difference to the families and to the communities. The participants described their attendance as being a meaningful part of working
with the families during these incidents. Kathleen was struck by how appreciative the family of
the student who took his own life was:

That happened, like, right at the break, so all of our students were gone. I did go to that
memorial service, and it was really a nontraditional kind of service, but they were really
appreciative that there was a university presence, because there was also a couple of
faculty members that had him in class that went. So, they were very appreciative for us
being there.

She said that they informed the family there would be a memorial event on campus and that they
would stay in touch, and her institution included the family in that event.

Ellen also indicated how much her attendance and the representation from the institution
at the funeral services meant to the families. She was surprised by how welcoming the families
were to representatives of the institution and how honored the families were to have
representatives attend the services:

Going to the services and reintroducing myself to the parents, and the “Oh! I remember
you!” Or them knowing me, just that, I think that was always a very emotional point. I
mean, just those statements, and I’m like, “This is not about us, or the institution. It’s
about you.”

She indicated that this reaction happened at the services for two of the three students they lost
that year. She believed that it helped the families with their grieving processes and positive
memories to focus on the institutional representation for a bit.

The SSAOs were also able to utilize their positions to make the process much smoother
for families and reduce some of the potential frustrations that could have arisen and added to
their stress. Michael acknowledged,
Going to meet with the family, I’m pretty hands on. We’ll do some strategies, where certain staff members may deal with certain communities, people on campus, but I tend to want to be point person with the family. I think it’s important that somebody at my rank at the university is paying that attention to them. Plus, in my position, if there’s certain resources they need or want, I can get them for them. So, you know, if the family wants our ensemble to sing at the funeral, I can make that happen. We’ll make it happen, or whatever they want.

Personal contact with the families during student deaths is crucial, even though it is challenging and not necessarily something for which SSAOs generally receive specific training. Kathleen reflected on this importance:

Well, I learned how important it is to have that personal contact. I guess, maybe, those that work at funeral homes and things like that, or health care workers that are constantly dealing with it, I’m sure that it becomes a little bit more of, not routine, but something that they do often enough that they can do that smoothly.

She further reflected upon how that personal contact, despite the challenges involved, made a positive impact in her work with the family. She explained,

Because I don’t want to say that it gets easier, because I’m sure it doesn’t. But that’s not something that we deal with all the time—it’s definitely not something that I deal with all the time—so then, there’s that incredible awkwardness of feeling like I’m not gonna have the right thing to say. But I think it really taught me that just being there is important enough that helps make that connection, so that you can be there when they need something and that they will know, then, to reach out to you.

She noted that SSAOs will not have the right thing to say, because there really are no words that are the right thing to say to a grieving family.
Finding appropriate words of comfort was among one of the greater challenges these SSAOs faced, but being able to help families through the loss of a child emerged as being considered one of the most important facets of this type of critical incident for administrators. Part of supporting families and helping them to move forward from their personal tragedies focused on including them in plans for memorializing the students and attempting to synthesize their wishes with the practices and policies of the institutions.

**Understanding Leadership Challenges and Opportunities**

There are lessons to be learned from the death of a student, and positive changes and new opportunities for community building can come from those lessons, despite the difficult circumstances. The participants were challenged, both personally and professionally, through their experiences managing incidents involving student death. However, each of these participants viewed their experiences as opportunities to develop and improve campus and external relationships, become stronger planners, and be better professionals. The need for institutional support was strongly emphasized by each of the participants regardless of the levels of support they received while managing a death event. The role that a president may play during a student death was less defined for the participants, based upon their experiences as well as their views of their own roles. The participants discussed what they learned and changes they made as a result of their experiences.

SSAOs typically handle responsibilities and tasks that no one else on campus handles. When death occurs, additional responsibilities are added to this leadership role. These may include helping students to achieve a better personal understanding of death, updating policies and procedures, and promoting healing within the community. Ringo reflected on the powerful learning and teaching moments for administrators within those duties:
From an educational standpoint, we have the added burden of, especially student affairs, understanding that [helping students to understand death] and nobody else, I mean, unless you take a gerontology class in sociology, nobody else’s role on campus—other than, maybe if you have a chaplain—and so, nobody else, other than maybe a sociology class, or a death and dying class, a philosophy class, maybe, has the role of having to teach that aspect. And boy, it’s not fun! You know, pizza and soda is not going to get a group to come out to a death and dying program.

He learned that senior student affairs administrators often are the ones who help students explore their feelings and questions about death.

Ringo found mentoring and paying attention to mentors to be among the most valuable lessons he has learned. He also considered critical incident management as an opportunity for SSAOs to provide mentoring to young professionals as a way to increase their preparedness. He stated,

New professionals can certainly do a lot to just listen to their leaders, and they actually could ask their leaders if they could sit in sometimes on some of these calls, maybe not the whole parent death call kind of thing, but if they could sit in, and listen, gaining that kind of insight into how people talk, the language they use, and how they cope, how they couch things, I think can be very valuable.

The importance of mentors for young professionals, particularly with regard to learning about the role, the ways professionals speak, and the language they use in serious circumstances, were important teaching opportunities for each of these administrators.

For the participants, changes sometimes came in the form of additions or amendments to policies and procedures, so it was important for the administrators to be flexible and willing to consider doing things differently and to persuade others to do the same. Ellen discussed a key
change her institution made with regard to awarding posthumous degrees following the student
deaths they experienced:

Their names come up frequently; it continued, following their passing and during
commencement, they were acknowledged. They didn’t earn, at the time of their passing,
足够的 for a posthumous degree, but that also prompted us, as an institution, to get a
policy in place for that. We did not have that, and so, this past year, we did some
research, looking, what do other schools do, and what fits with our institution, and so,
that is now in place.

Some changes that were enacted illustrated how the institution valued the individual, and it
helped the entire community and the families to move forward in positive way.

Reflections for participants often focused upon how the people involved could be better
served. Michael’s respect and admiration for the strength exhibited by families increased
throughout his encounters with student death. Additionally, he became more in tune with
separating students who were truly suffering and those who needed attention for other reasons
and offering the appropriate resources for all of them:

You know, I said part of it earlier, I think that the stoic approach of the family, and then,
the impact on outsiders, the attention getters, the folks that, “Look at me! I knew this
person so well, I can hardly function. I can’t go to class.” And they didn’t know, but
they wanted some attention. Something that you need to pay attention to. It’s there. I
have my team look at that. And, you know, a small college is great. You send out an
email to your faculty and staff and you say, “We’re sorry about this loss, and if you’re
concerned about students, let us know.”

An important aspect about small colleges for Michael was his belief that student affairs
administrators are able to keep a better handle on the struggles of those within the community
than administrators at larger universities are able to do and can provide a more personal approach to the leadership challenges that accompany student death.

Kathleen concurred that the small campus environment helped her, as a leader, to guide her staff better through the challenges they faced as they worked closely together to help their community. Despite the stress she felt from some members of the community, Kathleen reflected on the pride she felt for the staff members on her team:

Well, you come right to the same answer, and I hope it’s not too trite, but I really was proud of our staff. I mean, I think that they are just some stellar individuals, and I just was reaffirmed; I mean, I was just really impressed! And I thought, “Boy, what a great group of folks.” What competent, impactful, folks these are.

The administrators were proud of the leadership exhibited and the work accomplished by their staffs, as well as by students who wanted to help. The support they offered to each other helped the responders to cope with the situation. The participants also discussed the issue of institutional support during critical incidents, and these points of view provided additional insights into their experiences.

**Institutional support.** The question of institutional support sparked some strong reflections among the participants. The participants had not considered how much or in what ways their institutions offered support to them and their staffs, if at all. During and after student deaths, the participants felt varying levels of support from within their institutions, particularly among fellow senior administrators and their presidents. However, all of the participants shared a firm belief that an institution should offer support to those staff members who are the most involved with responding to such a situation. The participants also recognized that they had received strong support from members of their own staffs and other colleagues on campus.
Diana indicated that she did receive a great deal of support laterally from colleagues when her two students died, but when she considered support she received from the senior administration, she stated,

I don’t know that they [senior administrators] did [offer support]. I hadn’t thought about it that way; I mean, my colleagues did. Colleagues, yeah, I had some faculty colleagues who were very helpful, but I wouldn’t say that there was a lot of support from above, no. Which is interesting; I mean, that’s one reason I think I recognize the people that work for me need support.

She found this reflection to be interesting and asserted that she believed that experience of a lack of support was a main reason she recognized that people who work for her need support. Diana reflected further on how support tends to work within an organization, by noting,

I think everybody at every level needs to have support, and schools are, honestly, not good at having support at the top. You always support those below you, and so when you get to the top, it’s very lonely. You have to find—and I feel very blessed—every institution I’ve ever worked at, I’ve had someone who is a peer or a colleague on the same level who I’ve reached out to.

Finding sources of support can be difficult, but it was essential for these administrators to have confidants who were able to listen and help them to process their thoughts and emotions.

Some of the participants felt a sense of isolation when managing student death. Diana expanded upon the challenges this isolation caused:

It’s real, I mean, as a leader, it can get very lonely, because you’re worried about, you’re thinking about, things from you out, and it only takes one or two times to realize that you have to have someone. You just have to.
She noted that SSAOs tend to think about their staffs, but they do not always think about themselves in these situations, and she believed that it was important for them to do so.

Following the death of a student, Ringo did feel supported; he received appropriate resources and felt as though there was a team approach, in some regard, to managing the incident:

I mean, I think there was a motivation from my superiors, that there was a team approach, and that we were all in it together. So, there was no throwing people under the bus. It wasn’t the kind of thing where the upper administration was throwing student affairs under the bus, because it was a drug incident.

He did believe he had backup and support on all of the issues involved.

However, despite feeling supported in terms of resources, Ringo did not feel as though he and his staff were offered emotional support during the situation they were managing. He reflected,

One of the negatives, I guess, I didn’t think of it as the time, is I don’t feel like there was particular empathy from the higher administrators about what we were going through, or what some staff might have been going through. And so, you know, in hindsight, I guess, there could have been more support, just kind of empathetic support, “We know what you’re going through.”

Kathleen appreciated her president’s team approach to dealing with the suicide of a student on campus and providing clear lines of communication. As a result, the community felt empowered and pulled together to address the situation:

Well, I do recommend, like our president did, the whole team approach and pulling people together, and making sure that lines of communication are free flowing and being
as transparent as possible. Because people find conspiracies under every rock, so
information is really power.

She believed that it is powerful to have people feel as though they are part of the community,
rather than not being part of it, and an institution should want people to feel connected.

However, she, too, felt that the institution could have done a better job with providing
support to the staff members who were most directly involved. She reflected,

I don’t know that anybody ever asked the question of me, you know, “What have we
done for our staff that were affected by this? How are we supporting them?” And while
I asked myself that question, I don’t know that I’m really satisfied with the answer,
because, as I said, at the point in which this occurred, it was break time, all these other
things were happening, and then, life as we know it, in student affairs, goes on.

She stated that she did not believe that the institution was insensitive. Rather, it is just that
taking care of the responders was just not built into the plan, and if nothing forces their hand as
an institution, the administration will not spend much time or effort examining it.

When asked to consider the institutional support he received following a student’s death,
Michael’s appeared to be a bit surprised and his response was a bit different as he noted,

Not much, because I control the support, I mean, I’m offering the support to the hall
directors, to the RAs, the staff around me, but I guess if I wanted to talk with one of our
counselors or our chaplain, I could.

When student deaths occurred, Michael focused on making sure his younger staff members were
supported and he monitored the emotions they were experiencing, such as grief or guilt. For
some, it was the first time a peer had died, so his focus has primarily been on providing support,
rather than considering what support he might need.
He acknowledged that his presidents trusted him to manage the situations, but noted his belief that institutions need to offer support to the primary responders to critical incidents:

I think about this in retrospect; institutions need to be sensitive to not only their first responders, but also their chief student affairs officer, and see how those folks are, and do a check-in with them as far as how they’re doing. I’ve always been fortunate that I’ve had bosses that just trusted I would take care of it, but boy, if I had a boss second-guessing me . . . And there’s not an exact science here; sometimes, you go with your gut, and sometimes, like I said, you practice, you rehearse, but the president may get a response from a faculty member, saying, “Student affairs is not doing enough. We should have a memorial service, and everybody should be here. Pull out all the strings.”

Michael talked about the trust of his presidents, rather than the support he received. He indicated that they trusted that he was taking care of the families, because he has been the one to understand what families needed, and what they wanted to do.

Even though her experiences managing student death brought about feelings of “frustration” and “sadness,” Ellen noted,

I think it also reinforced my feelings for the institution, in that we do good things, and we’re good together. We’re a good place. Feeling sad and grieving, but also optimistic in that, you know, we’ll get through this. We’ll learn.

She added, however, “No one came out and said, ‘How can I help you?’ It was more of, ‘What are you doing for the students?’” Regarding other senior administrators on campus, Ellen reflected that they should be involved earlier in the process, as it is unfolding:

There needs to be that relief and that step-in, and whether that’s someone is allowed some extra time away, whether that’s counseling services for those professionals, you
know, and *not* just always immediately *after*. I think it’s down the line, once the living of
the situation, or the incident, starts to alleviate.

Ellen asserted that when others at the institution have moved on from the incident and resumed a
normal routine or even perhaps forgotten about the incident to an extent, the personnel who were
part of responding to and managing the situation may not have yet moved on, and she surmised
that it might be a really difficult time for them.

Just as the participants believed clear role definition was a key factor for effective
management, they also believed that instituting strategies for providing relief and support to
those who respond to such events could also promote more effective management. No one
seemed distressed about the lack of support, although when they were asked, all of the
participants agreed it was a good idea for institutions to consider. The participants agreed that
this was an area within critical incident management that had often been overlooked within their
planning processes. Another aspect the participants discussed for SSAOs to understand prior to
managing a student death was the role the president of the institution would play in that
management.

Participants discussed how the core values of the institution gave community members a
point around which they could gather. A central tenet of faith or another type of core value
helped to bring people together and help each other and focused on what was appropriate to the
institution. For Kathleen’s institution, the core value of faith was an important guiding principle
that brought the community together in the aftermath of a student’s suicide:

I mean, clearly, we’ve got a chapel on campus, and we’ve got a big old cross on top of it,
so faith is something that is central to the life of the institution. That would vary by
institution, but, where that is important some way—if it’s not faith—I still think a way of
getting the community together is still gonna be central, because you want information,
but you also want people to be able to come together and just be a resource for each other, helping each other.

She noted that it is not possible for a student affairs staff to get to everybody, so it is important to reinforce the idea that it is a community, and people need to look out for one another.

**The role of the president.** The role of the president varies during such critical incidents. Some of the participants’ presidents chose to be extremely involved, and others chose to rely on these senior administrators to take the lead. The view of the role of the president was one that varied widely among the participants. Presidents were not necessarily viewed in a leadership capacity or as being specifically supportive to the SSAOs and other primary responders when students have died. They were viewed as being absent, or as part of the upper administration who helped with resources, but did not necessarily display empathy or understanding of what these primary responders were experiencing.

Three of the participants discussed their presidents, specifically. Michael described his presidents as supporting him, historically, but allowing him to take the lead in managing student death. They did not second-guess his actions, and chose to be involved in more of a ceremonial capacity, such as being part of the graduation ceremony of the student who had a terminal illness. Diana did not recall anything about her president’s presence throughout the response to the car accident with the four students. Kathleen’s president, however, took a very strong lead during the response to a student’s suicide.

Having the president involved in ceremonial rituals and attending the visitation or the funeral can be important to a grieving family. Michael explained the importance of the president’s presence to a family at the visitation for a student who had passed away:

When our president was new, we had a student who—actually, we had two students in her first month that we lost—one died in a climbing accident right before school started,
and the other was a suicide. She didn’t know either one of the students. But what it meant to that family that the president of the university and the vice president showed up to that funeral home, and we drove some miles, it was immensely healing for them.

The participants acknowledged that presidents determine what their roles will be during responses to student death. Some choose not to become involved or be present even for the ceremonial events. It is important for SSAOs to know what their president prefers prior to a death. Diana noted,

It’s sad that I don’t even remember. I don’t even remember if the president went to the funerals or not. I don’t remember that part. That’s one thing I’ve thought about lately. You know, I’m in a new institution, and I think that some presidents are very hands-on with emergency situations, and they’re very involved in support, and I think, some are not, and it just depends on the leader.

As Michael suggested, some presidents prefer to allow the SSAOs to manage the incident and take the lead.

However, some presidents choose to be heavily involved and active participants in managing the situation. Kathleen’s experience was far different from Diana’s, and even Michael’s experiences, during the response to the student’s death on her campus. Her president employed a team approach for responding to the situation:

In the way that our president works, I mean, he’s very much one that believes in the team, and in being transparent and everybody sharing things. He modeled, I think, that whole idea that it’s gonna take the team to guide us through this, so he was excellent. Additionally, Kathleen noted how the president’s leadership during the situation with regard to certain aspects offered an additional sense of order and comfort to the community. She stated,
I think he did call the team, but it’s clear that he’s the leader, and I think it was important that the communication that went out across campus was under his signature, so that people know, because people do need to have a feeling that, while there is a team, there is somebody that’s in charge, and ultimately, the buck is gonna stop there.

She suggested that this kind of order gives comfort to people within the community.

SSAOs often work with their presidents to determine what tasks their presidents are comfortable performing when student death occurs. As participants noted, their presidents had a range of views on what level of involvement they desire to have during such events. This clarification was also important for these senior administrators, so they would know the types of support they (and other primary responders) could expect to receive from the president during any future similar events. Despite all of the challenging lessons these types of incidents teach those who have to manage them, the participants also discovered positive outcomes and sources of satisfaction within their experiences.

**Positive outcomes and sources of satisfaction.** Despite the challenges and sadness student death created for these SSAOs and for their campus communities, the participants all recognized positive outcomes and discussed sources of satisfaction they extracted from the situations. The responsibility of managing a student death at small college campuses had personal and professional effects on the participants. A death sometimes was the spark that ignited discussions and programs that led to greater awareness of related issues. At Ellen’s institution, a student’s suicide opened up discussions about suicide and generated reflection throughout the campus:

It definitely brought into the discussions of who else on our campus is struggling? What else can we do to reach out? Because I feel we do a lot about suicide prevention and education and just taking care of one another; you know, be somebody’s brightest
“Hello.” And I think that incident caused a lot, especially those residents, to think about their own actions and their own impact on other people, that we all are powerful individuals, and we may be having a bad day, but someone else’s day may be worse, and our actions could help them, if we take the time to stop thinking about ourselves. So, I think it was very positive, in that I was proud of the culture that we’ve built.

She considered it a positive outcome that students at her institution are not afraid to talk about the “S” word, and she was proud of the culture they have built since this situation happened.

The development of one’s confidence is both necessary and important for success in a senior student affairs administrative role. Kathleen, Diana, and Ringo all discussed the issue of confidence. One way confidence is developed is through successfully facing difficult challenges, such as taking on the responsibilities of managing student death. Kathleen found that her professional confidence was challenged during a student death by the stressful situation that involved faculty who felt they were not being given enough information. Kathleen also recognized the importance of the interaction with the parents and family of the student who died, and what she learned about the human spirit in such circumstances:

The thing that always stands out to me is the interaction with the families, especially the parents. It’s the worst possible phone call, it’s the worst possible conversation or discussion you could have with anybody, and, obviously, you can tell that these people are broken, are hurting, but I have just been amazed, I think, at just the resilience of the human spirit, and how appreciative they have been of just the smallest things. It’s more of a roller coaster ride, but it’s just amazing to me how they’ve taken time to be appreciative about whatever small gesture we’ve given.

For her, being able to witness the resiliency of parents and families was an amazing testament to the human spirit.
Diana also found the experience of managing student death to have a positive outcome in terms of increasing her confidence within her role, as she explained,

I think if it were to happen today, I would feel even more confident in my ability to handle it. Not that it’s easier. It just gives you a little more confidence, in dealing with it, because I think it went as well as it could. And that’s the thing—it’s never gonna go well. What you can do is you can give it some structure, and give some people some confidence that’s it’s handled appropriately. Nobody’s gonna be happy in the end, but if they feel like you cared about them, and that you handled it the best that you could, then, OK.

Diana also noted, “I think the importance of adaptability, the importance of focus, the importance of resilience, and the importance of follow-up, just being able to follow-up with those students and the students, who were affected.” She found these abilities to be integral to managing the experience effectively.

Ringo also noted that managing student death gave him a sense of confidence in being able to handle any aspect of the role. Ringo’s experiences with student death also confirmed for him the importance being the type of professional who is willing to share their experiences about how they managed critical incidents involving student death. He acknowledged this by stating, “It’s very tempered. It’s very calm, and I think that’s the benefit of having seasoned professionals who can apply their life experience, but also their professional experience to the situation.” He also talked about how much it helped his own personal development as a young professional to be able to listen and observe how his early supervisors handled critical situations.

These SSAOs had the opportunity to offer support to families and students in ways that would have been more difficult, and less expected, at larger institutions. Following a student’s
death, Kathleen was reminded of the positive nature of this personalized attention to situations that student affairs divisions at small institutions offer as she reflected,

Maybe it has reinforced what I have felt to be the case, since I came here, and especially since I took this particular position, that part of being in a student affairs role at a school of this size is about that personalized attention. It’s about the individual circumstances being handled individually, and just that need to make that human connection with people and just let them know that you care, and that you want to make a positive difference, even though sometimes, you may not be able to.

The belief in the ability of SSAOs to provide more focused individualized attention to families and students at small campuses was apparent among the participants, and they found this aspect to be a source of satisfaction.

For Michael, also, the satisfaction he has discovered in these incidents involved working with a family to see them find some peace in a tragic situation, and helping them to understand what the student meant to the institution:

Helping the family—or not even helping—seeing the family come to some peace, to see some good in what happened. My satisfaction is kind of making that connection between that student and the university, and the fact that that student was loved here, he had friends here, he was a character here.

Additionally, there were positive outcomes from the situation when the institution was able to maintain a positive connection with the family by collaborating on a memorial that enhanced the collegiate experience for other students.

Michael also found a sense of achievement in being one of the people who established those relationships that created something positive out of tragic circumstances:
I think satisfaction is when you can make that connection, and then, when all of a sudden, six months later, students, or faculty, or development officers even, are still in contact with the family, and helping them set up a type of endowment, explaining that to them and how they’re excited to be doing that.

Working with the families, staff, students, and their communities and helping them to move away from a tragic space to the beginning of the recovery process was a source of satisfaction for the participants. There were challenges that needed to be addressed, and these senior administrators found themselves trying to maintain a balance of appropriately celebrating the life of the student in conjunction with the families’ wishes and allowing the community to memorialize the student as part of the healing process. Being able to find the experience meaningful was an important part of the overall process for the SSAOs. Each of the participants acknowledged that positive outcomes resulted from each student death they managed. It was challenging for some of the participants to separate the personal and professional impacts of the events, but some of the outcomes and satisfaction gained from their experiences seemed to be generated at the intersection of the two.

**Summary of Findings**

Throughout this chapter, I presented the experiences of five senior student affairs administrators who had the responsibility of managing critical incidents that resulted in student death. The presentation of these experiences emerged across the phases of the Crisis Management Cycle (Zdziarski et al., 2007), which included planning, prevention, response, recovery, and learning.

Participants’ beliefs about college student death management indicated that the manner in which a student dies shapes how they and the institution respond. The participants expressed beliefs that suicide tended to require the most complex responses, both from themselves and their
institutions. To be effective, these senior administrators believed they needed to possess a strong awareness and understanding of cultural concerns and family dynamics. In addition, they discussed the importance of possessing a balanced combination of progressive experience, preparation and training, and a personal understanding of death and dying. Guiding with compassion while maintaining a strong professional presence emerged as a prominent factor in effectively managing student death and aiding the families involved. Participants believed it was important to have strong policies and procedures, understand liability concerns and risks, and work well with academic affairs. Additionally, the participants discussed the importance of role definition during the management of such events for a more effective response. Maintaining a strong relationship with the media and offering appropriate resources to the campus community were also considered to be vital elements for effectively responding to student death.

Participants felt it was crucial to manage their own emotions, as well as those of the community following a student death. Additionally, providing guidance and support to the parents and families involved and helping them during a traumatic time was deeply important to the participants. Participants’ experiences illustrated for them the necessity of being leaders in promoting the healing and restoration of the community and the need for appropriate support and self-care for all involved, while ensuring that healthy and appropriate memorializing takes place.

The participants found balancing the suggestions and ideas of community members with the needs and wishes of the families of the deceased extremely challenging. They considered processing those emotions to be a key factor in dealing effectively with the phenomenon and creating a sense of wellness and healing among staff members and students. Participants also considered maintaining healthy habits individually and accepting the support of colleagues while processing the emotions involved to be a key factor as they worked through these situations.
Despite feelings of sadness and loss at the death of someone in the midst of pursuing life and career goals, there was also, interwoven, feelings of pride and recognition of meaningful aspects and satisfaction emerged for the participants from the experience. Participants found personal and professional meaning within their experiences. They also discussed taking on additional duties that were unique to each student death, and how these extra duties ended up being among the most important and helpful to the families.

Student death created challenges for the participants’ campus communities, but it also provided opportunities for leadership, collaboration, and stronger connections to be made within their communities. The participants all expressed the importance of institutional support during these situations, and while each had been offered varying levels of support, all believed that the support for responders, especially, should be strong and effective. Additionally, the roles their presidents played varied. Some were actively involved, and others were not part of the situation. Finally, the participants found positive outcomes and sources of satisfaction in these experiences and recognized that as difficult as it was for them to manage these types of events, they considered their responses to be effective and believed their experiences enriched them personally and professionally. In the chapter that follows, I discuss the significance of the findings, and propose potential implications for practice and further avenues of research.

According to Jellinek, Bostic, and Schlozman (2007), “Some students, especially those feeling unpopular or isolated, may be drawn to suicide because of the community reaction, which can seem to glorify the deceased student” (p. 80). What student affairs administrators and their staffs must consider and monitor is the issue of contagion, particularly if a student’s suicide could be viewed or is memorialized in a romanticized way. As noted by participants, others who may be contemplating self-harm may take action in the aftermath of a successful suicide, so the possibility of contagion is a very real issue and concern. Levine (2008) suggested, “To minimize
contagion, campus memorials might take the form of contributions to mental health and suicide prevention organizations or campus scholarships. Memorial services, if held, should stress the unnecessary nature of the death and provide information related to prevention” (p. 72).

As some of the participants discussed, a situation where a student makes the choice to permanently resolve a temporary set of problems through suicide can be highly frustrating. When a student believes that is the only option available, despite programs and awareness campaigns, a lot of questions arise, particularly, “Why?”

The challenges involved, as well as the personal and professional effects, of suicide were evident from the data that emerged during the course of the interviews. Suicides affected the small campus communities differently than the other types of death. The suicides discussed by the participants clearly generated more professional reflection than other types of death they encountered. Even when students left letters behind explaining their reasons behind this choice, the question of why they made that decision was unanswered. For professionals who are used to resolving issues and concerns, and who are “fixers,” having such a large question remain unanswered goes against who they are as professionals.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this study was to examine how SSAOs on small college campuses manage college student death. This included how they prepared for, responded to, and managed student death, how they navigated the emotions involved in the situation, and what they found to be meaningful, both personally and professionally, about the experience. Themes emerged throughout all phases of the Crisis Management Cycle to inform the process and address the research questions. After a summary of the findings, a discussion through the lens of relevant literature follows. Finally, implications for practice and further avenues of research are offered for consideration.

Both the literature and the participants indicated that managing college student death is an inevitable event, as opposed to merely being a potential one that SSAOs will encounter. Death at a small college takes an emotional toll on the campus community, as well as on the professional and paraprofessional staff members who respond to the situation and guide the community through the recovery process toward healing. For the senior student affairs administrators managing student death while simultaneously handling multiple responsibilities presents unique challenges and demands. Critical incidents involving student death are unique in that during the immediate response phase it is the parents and families who take precedence for SSAOs, not the students. The wishes and needs of the parents trump student plans and desires, particularly with regard to memorialization.

As both the literature and the participants have acknowledged, having clear policies, procedures, and practices in place within an emergency response plan is essential for an institution of higher education to promote effective critical incident management. When death is involved, urgency increases. Although campus responders may plan well and promote prevention of student death, campus constituents must not be naïve in thinking their campuses
are immune to this possibility. Not only must the response be effective and compassionate, but the recovery must be as well, in order for healing to occur.

Additionally, administrators must reflect on the entire situation and glean what was learned and how that knowledge may be applicable to future incidents. As SSAOs help to guide their communities through the phases of the incident, they must be prepared for and sensitive to aspects that are incident-specific. Neglecting these unique elements could have negative ramifications and delay recovery and healing. Finally, although it is imperative to have strong policies and protocols in place and it is necessary to follow them, student death management seems to be more successful and effective when compassionate guidance is employed by SSAOs.

Through their responses, the participants collectively generated thoughtful insights that frequently overlapped to answer the research questions that guided this study: (1) How do SSAOs prepare for, respond to, and manage student death at small college campuses? (2) How do they navigate the emotions involved? and (3) What did they find to be meaningful, both personally and professionally, about this experience? An overview of the answers to these questions is included in this chapter, followed by a discussion of some key aspects, implications for practice, and ideas for further research.

**Preparation, Response, and Student Death Management**

The process of managing college student death is complex and challenging. With professional experience in the student affairs field ranging between one and a half to nearly four decades, each of the research participants offered her or his insights into necessary considerations SSAOs must take into account in when responding to student death, including the manner of death. The types of death a community may encounter generate different feelings, all complex, and all require finesse in the management of them.
Suicide generated the most reflection and discussion among the participants, emerging as the most complex and challenging of the types of death encountered. Unlike other types of death, when a suicide happens, the concern for contagion is a real factor. Thus, responders must divide their attention between supporting those who are suffering from the loss of a friend, and ensure that others with suicidal ideation are provided support to prevent other attempts. Suicide was the most challenging form of student death for the participants who encountered it, both for the personal reflection it generated and for the community, especially with regard to emotions and appropriate memorialization. Accidents, overdoses, medical conditions and terminal illnesses were the other manners of death included in this study, and each type required unique management.

It was critical for administrators to possess a strong awareness of cultural concerns and complex family dynamics they may encounter. How well they handled those aspects had a direct impact on how effective the overall response was. The participants held strong beliefs about the need for administrators to possess sensitivity to cultural and racial differences and not make any assumptions about how the family dynamics worked. Finding out as much as possible about the student prior to meeting the family and following the lead of the parents and families were recognized as essential strategies for an effective approach. Participants suggested that had they not had a strong awareness, it could have damaged the effectiveness of the management and could have made an already difficult situation worse for both the families and the institution.

All participants acknowledged that having a personal understanding of death—gained through experience, academic preparation, or spiritual grounding—was helpful for them professionally and personally when they had to manage student death. Participants discussed how their own personal and professional understanding of death aided them through such events. They viewed this as essential to an administrator’s preparation and training for the role. In
addition to developing this awareness, the participants discussed how they continually prepared 
for such events by reflecting on what they would do in any given situation, learning from other 
administrators, training with their staff members, and focusing on ways to be prepared and keep 
their campus communities prepared for such events.

Woven throughout the entire process was an understanding of the need to maintain an 
appropriate balance of caring, compassionate guidance, and a realistic understanding of 
empathetic boundaries. Possessing the ability to adapt quickly and having the mental dexterity 
to expect the unexpected at all times, while remaining calm, capable, and compassionate as a 
leader, was a consistent message that emerged. In addition, planning appropriately, regularly, 
and thoroughly was an important aspect of being able to approach such events and effectively 
lead their campuses through the situation.

All of the participants advocated for clear policies and procedures and the need to follow 
them, yet be flexible in responding to the unique aspects of individual situations. Possessing a 
thorough understanding of liability concerns and risks was also considered by participants to be 
vital to effective management. Collaborating with academic affairs and addressing faculty 
concerns or questions regularly, rather than just during critical incidents, was a key factor in 
planning effectively for what should happen when a student death occurs. Planning that was 
inclusive of other areas of the institution emerged as being imperative for these administrators.

Role definition emerged as another theme that was important in managing student death. 
When staff members have their roles clearly defined, there is less confusion and the overall 
approach is more cohesive. The participants advocated for having the roles clearly defined prior 
to an actual event and making sure all responders understand their roles and have access to 
procedures for those roles.
Additionally, all of the participants confirmed the necessity of having the public relations/marketing and communications department of the institution take the lead on working with the media and sending out correspondence to the larger community. All of the participants believed that establishing strong media relations and being able to work effectively with the media an essential component of effective preparation and management. Each of the participants advised working with the public relations department to draft a statement about the student or students who have passed away, but recommended not talking with the media unless advised to do so by the department handling external communications.

Although proactive resource distribution was discussed as being imperative to an effective management approach, the participants also believed in the necessity of ensuring that community members are consistently informed about available resources that exist on campus. Participants recognized that not everyone will embrace continual updates and may feel somewhat uninformed when an actual event occurs, but they believed in the value of periodically finding ways to engage the community in understanding the resources that exist on campus. Offering resources throughout the campus periodically, not just during critical incidents, was a practice the participants desired to do better, but considered a struggle. However, they acknowledged the challenges in having enough time to do so and with having the community recognize the importance of these resources during times when incidents are not occurring.

**Navigating Emotions**

The participants had a great deal to discuss about the emotional toll that a student death can take on a small campus community. One important way these SSAOS navigated the emotions involved with student death was by focusing on working effectively with the parents and families of students directly involved in the situation. For these SSAOs, ensuring families had necessary information and addressing the tasks that needed to be completed were their main
priorities when responding to student deaths. The participants spoke of the crucial importance of these aspects to the incident management process. Some of the participants described the admiration they had for how appreciative the families were for the support offered by responders.

In addition, the participants were impressed by the resiliency and strength that families often exhibited during such tragic circumstances. The resiliency of families who have suffered a great loss was inspirational and reinforced for these participants the need for senior administrators to hone their own skills of adaptability and resiliency. The participants also discussed how important it was to them to help families find some peace within those tragedies. By supporting families and students through these tragic situations, the administrators learned to focus on how the students lived, rather than how they died. These administrators found it to be rewarding to be able to offer support and help families and their communities move forward from such tragic circumstances.

Each of the participants acknowledged that there are unique aspects to every critical incident involving student death. The participants also addressed the necessity of continuing to work with families beyond the death, and the significance of administrators and institutions to continue these relationships for as long as the families need to remain connected. In some instances, scholarship funding, the development of memorial sporting events, and awareness campaigns in partnership with the students’ hometowns and high schools have been positive and healing results of continued work with families.

Among the most challenging aspects of managing the experience for the participants was the management of the community, which included facilitating the various, and mostly unsolicited opinions, ideas, and suggestions offered by community members. They found themselves serving as mediators for requests that included class cancellation, more extensive
resource distribution, memorial events, honoring the deceased with building naming or scholarships, and 5K runs for awareness and fundraising. They discussed memorializing as an emotional issue and a delicate process that could become stressful and unwieldy, if not navigated appropriately.

Participants emphasized the need to put the wishes of the families involved above the desires of the community and to establish boundaries while remaining consistent with institutional procedures and practices. Participants suggested researching what other institutions do, and if a policy has not yet been established to address a certain issue, then creating one may address some of the emotional appeals fairly. Some participants discussed feeling as though they served as mediators for all of the requests and suggestions for memorializing a deceased student, but reiterated that what the family desired had to be the priority of the senior student affairs administrator and the institution.

The support and care of professional and paraprofessional staff members who served as primary responders, as well as caring for the students within their communities, emerged as an important consideration for the participants. In addition to caring for the families, supporting other primary responders and students were important concerns of the participants, when navigating the influx of emotions that occurred during such events. They paid particular attention to the primary responders to the event, the friendship network of the deceased, and their students. Participants discussed having to keep a rein on their own emotions, particularly their feelings of frustration, when dealing with questions and requests from the community that were not necessarily helpful in either their scope or their timing. Participants also noted that it was challenging to curb frustration when dealing with student issues unrelated to the student death.

All of the participants discussed the importance, and the necessity, of putting their own emotions aside for effective management of the event. None of the participants found this easy
to do, acknowledging the difficulties involved and the necessity of setting aside their own emotions in order to be effective leaders. The participants also recognized the need for self-care, particularly when coping with the phenomenon of managing a college student death. The administrators advocated ongoing means of self-care, including regular physical exercise, taking real vacations when possible, and having trusted colleagues with whom they can process their thoughts and feelings.

Participants also suggested speaking with a therapist or counselor on a regular basis as a healthy outlet. Being able to process their emotions with colleagues and being supported by colleagues was integral to participants’ coping processes. Despite the challenges involved, support of staff and students, self-care, and processing emotions with the aid of colleagues were all described as helpful to moving the community forward to a place of healing and recovery.

**Meaningful Personal and Professional Aspects of the Experience**

Once the intensity of the critical incident lessened and participants’ communities began to move forward, evaluations of the event, formal and informal as well as professional and personal, took place. The participants discussed both the personal and the professional impact of the phenomenon and reflected upon the lessons learned and changes that have occurred. In some way, for each of the participants, the personal and the professional intertwined and overlapped. Ringo summed up what was meaningful about the experience overall for him, by stating, “I think it reinforces something I already knew, which is life is fragile, and that you need to embrace the good things that are going on in your life daily. That’s probably the big takeaway.”

The participants also found the extra duties that were generated by the circumstances of the event, or perhaps by the families, to be meaningful. They found these duties to be important endeavors that offered deeper insights into the experience for them. These included supporting the friends of a student who committed suicide while his mother read individual letters to them,
sitting with parents during a police investigation of bomb materials found in the apartment of a student who had died from an overdose, and taking students to the funeral home and helping them to process their feelings about a fellow student’s death. Participants discussed both the challenges and the opportunities involved for those leading when student death occurs, with particular emphasis centered around the issues of institutional support and the role of the president. Each of the participants found these experiences to be valuable for them both personally and professionally, despite the challenging circumstances. They also helped their communities to recognize the value of these experiences. Ringo found this to be true in both his personal and professional experiences and indicated he attempts to help students to process death in healthy ways in his role as student affairs professional. From situations in his own life, he reflected a change that has involved discussing death from a theoretical viewpoint to one that incorporates the wisdom of experience.

Participants also found value in reflecting upon what was accomplished well and what could have been done better. Lessons learned from the process were then incorporated into future planning. Clear communication and including community members from other areas were considered to be vital to effective response and management.

Despite the challenges generated by the deaths, the participants all felt these incidents had personal and professional impacts and they use what they learned from these past experiences within their current roles. The participants reiterated the admiration they had for the strength and resiliency of the families under such difficult circumstances, and they gained a deeper wisdom about the fragility of life and the need to find the good in everyday aspects of life.

The participants also think differently, not only about how they design their messages to new students when speaking with them, but in the ways they consider about how to speak to
their own children to help keep them safe. Participants discussed having some difficulty separating the personal impact from the professional impact, but acknowledged that the experience challenges administrators to separate their emotions. Gaining patience and self-confidence were two lasting impacts participants experienced and found to be meaningful.

Although following procedures and protocols is imperative to effective critical incident management involving student death, the participants also acknowledged that SSAOs must also be willing to embrace flexibility and perform necessary duties that may not fall within the purview of their defined roles. Each of the participants discussed having to address unexpected duties that fell outside their standard responsibilities. These included packing up the deceased students’ rooms, supporting family members as they were interviewed by the police, listening to a mother while she read her son’s suicide letters out loud to his friends, and promoting a change in protocol to provide a terminally ill student with the opportunity to graduate from college before she passed away. It was through these other duties as assigned to them through the student death that the participants often developed stronger connections with the families, their students, and fellow staff members, and thus, gained a deeper wisdom and found the experience meaningful as a result.

The participants found that even though there were leadership challenges involved in these critical incidents that involved student death, there were also opportunities that enriched their work as SSAOs. Their reflections on what they learned allowed them to explore the personal and professional impact the phenomenon had on them. In turn, they have used this knowledge and applied it to their work, the planning they do, and to their personal lives. Having gone through the experience of managing student death made participants understand that once it occurs, a real possibility exists that it could happen again.
The participants discussed the need for institutional support for primary campus responders. Participants discussed ways their institutions provided resources or did not interfere with their management of the situations. However, the participants also noted a lack of understanding, empathy, and personal support at times, particularly from the upper administration, for what SSAOs and their staffs were handling. Participants shared their views about the need for institutional support for those who are primary responders to death at campuses. Some had not considered this as a necessity, but as they reflected through their participation in this study, all of the participants stressed the importance of the institution providing appropriate support to those involved with the management of a student death.

The role of the president was a complex area for the participants, both in their experiences regarding the level of involvement their presidents had during such events and in their views of what they believed the role of the president should be. Though some presidents engaged in strong leadership and were heavily involved throughout the experience, others allowed the senior administrators considerable autonomy to fulfill the duties of managing the experience. Some presidents were not actively engaged with the situation, according to what the participants remembered. The participants agreed that the level of actual involvement is dependent upon the president’s leadership style, and they concurred that official correspondence to the campus community should be generated from the president’s office. They believed the community found correspondence to be more meaningful when it was generated from the president’s office.

Being able to share the experience and guide students through what was often their first experience with death, particularly of a peer, was considered to be a valuable aspect of participants’ own work as educators. The value of student affairs at small institutions was
reinforced during these situations, as was the importance of learning from and being good mentors.

These SSAOs developed a deeper awareness of the need for both personal and professional planning, as opposed to being reactive, for when a situation involving student death occurs. They shared their feelings of pride in the work their staff members in responding to the situations and promoting recovery and healing on their campuses in the aftermath of the incidents. Additionally, they discussed the pride they felt in being able to foster institutional changes, such as awarding degrees and revising critical incident protocols. Underlying these reflective observations of what the experience meant to them was a renewed appreciation for time spent with students. They valued their time spent with students, helping them to move forward from these incidents and providing teachable moments to those who were facing the death of a peer or friend for the first time. They noted that their students were not the only ones to learn as a result of these situations, but that they, too, learned a great deal.

Discussion

The Crisis Management Cycle (Zdziarski et al., 2007) was effective for framing this research. However, a key aspect of these findings was that the participants focused more directly on the need to use compassionate care and guidance (Figley, 1995; Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007), and simply being present as a supportive leader for all aspects of a situation involving student death, in order to be effective throughout the management of the incident. Similar to the literature (Donohue, 1977; Zdziarski, 2006), the participants were in strong agreement that clear and well-developed policies and procedures must be in place as reference points for the campus community, but they offered that their actions were based more intuitively on what they believed were the right things to do to help others throughout the response and management of the event. There are the standard business aspects that must be addressed (Cusick, 2008), such as making
the appropriate notifications and closing out the student’s account, but truly effective management appears to be less tangible.

The participants talked of doing what needed to be done to aid the families, serving as mediators for the spectrum of emotions generated by student death, and ensuring that the emotional needs of the campus community are met and addressed. It was suggested throughout the literature that crisis and critical incident management plans should be comprised of checklists and protocols to ensure consistency and guide action (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Crafts, 1985; Iserson, 1999). However, according to these participants and other areas of the literature, crisis and critical incident management on a college campus should be more of a balance of following procedures and guiding with compassion to provide effective care and response and promote healing (Archer, 1992; Halberg, 1986; Zdziarski, 2006).

Over the course of the ten meetings with the participants, the connective vein running throughout the interviews was the participants’ concern for the well being of others. Collectively, they shared a gentle insistence that empathy and compassion must be the guides for SSAOs when approaching and managing critical incidents involving student death. However, consistent with the literature, the participants argued that coupled with this compassionate care must be a keen legal awareness and a strong understanding of liability issues (Gibbs & Szablewicz, 1994; Newmarker, 2007; Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007). The participants also emphasized that those who pursue senior administrative roles in student affairs have a deep understanding of students and the challenges they face. Additionally, administrators should know the issues students face and risks they may take, due to where they are developmentally (Ahuna, 1999) that may threaten their safety.

SSAOs should have a strong professional and personal awareness of cultural and racial differences that is integrated into this compassionate care they provide during these incidents
(Jablonski et al., 2008). Every situation has aspects that arise that are unique to that particular incident, and having a comprehensive awareness and sensitivity to cultural issues that may be involved is imperative for effective management of the event. A lack of strong awareness and sensitivity in the approach could add further emotional harm to an already tragic situation for a grieving family. The participants stressed that administrators cannot make assumptions about issues, such as family dynamics or religious preferences. Participants also recommended taking time to check for helpful information in a student’s admission files or asking for information from the student’s friends.

As noted by Hamilton (2008) and Utterback and Caldwell (1989), working closely with parents and families from the initial notification and offering support to help them find a sense of closure was cited by participants as being a key factor in the overall management of student death. The concept of resilience (Bonanno, 2004, 2005; Cowan, 1991) emerged during the interviews as an important trait appreciated by the participants. Admiration for the families and for their resilience was evident in participants’ responses, and the sense of pride from being able to help families to achieve some sense of closure was mixed with the frustration of not being able to fix the situation and make it better. This mixture of emotions was difficult for these administrators who have a role that does, indeed, facilitate getting issues resolved for students and their families. Additionally, the participants discussed a sense of satisfaction with regard to the educational aspect of helping students to normalize grief and process those feelings, as they encounter another type of transition beyond the scope of experience of most students. Also evident was the pride they had for their professional and paraprofessional staffs and the compassionate care offered by these primary responders.

Training for constituents across campus was cited in the literature as aiding in effective incident response (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Streufort, 2004; Wilson, 2007). The participants
had strong recommendations for professional training for the SSAOs, and also for all members of the student affairs staff, the paraprofessional student staff, faculty, and the campus community. Additionally, it was recommended that administrators who wish to serve in senior roles should pursue personal development opportunities to increase their own understanding of death and dying. When they are faced with student death, possessing a well-developed professional awareness of the death and dying process will aid SSAOs in their roles. Practicing for a student death through tabletop exercises was suggested, as was practicing for the possibility of having to notify family members of a student’s death.

Student death at a small campus can create emotional ramifications that extend widely throughout the campus community. Navigating through those emotions in order to promote healing and eventually bring a sense of closure to community is an integral part of what SSAOs must accomplish well when managing a student death. Additionally, ensuring that staff members serving as the primary responders to such an event are supported properly during the incident and beyond is also part of the compassionate care that is expected of one serving in a senior administrative role in student affairs.

Of all of the types of death encountered by these participants, suicide was a manner of death that created particular challenges for their communities, due to the range of emotions generated by this ultimate act of self-harm. Thus, suicide created unique challenges for these senior administrators, as they found themselves serving as mediators between those who felt memorializing should honor the life of the student, and those who were concerned that memorializing the student would glorify that type of death, a concern examined by Levine (2008). Suicide also challenged the administrators’ perceptions about the amount and types of programs and awareness campaigns they had developed and promoted on their campuses.
For some participants, there was a question of whether or not they had missed something about the student. For professionals who view themselves as “fixers” who are adept at resolving issues and providing safe environments for students, when a student attempts and commits suicide, there are unanswered questions and frustration. Community gatherings and support, such as those suggested by Meilman and Hall (2008), were important aspects of the response, recovery, and learning aspects for the participants, and helped to guide their planning as well as their healing processes.

The participants discussed ways in which they provided support to their staff members, both formally and informally, in attempts to prevent or mitigate burnout or disillusionment. They discussed sending staff members home to offer relief or had more formal meetings to process emotions. Additionally, they discussed the informal ways all staff members supported each other, such as sharing meals and just talking, or stopping by offices to check in on one another. The participants also discussed how their work with students and supporting them throughout the incident and recovery process helped the participants to process their own emotions. As was suggested by Madrid and Grant (2008), focusing on the needs of their staffs and students seemed to provide a restorative sense of balance to the participants during and after student death. As noted earlier, the participants’ concern was for the families, their staffs, their students, and the overall community. A few of the participants were surprised when asked to consider ways in which their institutions had supported them, yet all participants agreed that support should be offered by institutions to primary responders in the form of empathic understanding and relief for some of the duties after the initial response.

The importance of self-care for student affairs professionals and those who are primary responders to critical incidents was promoted in the literature (Manning, 2007; Sandeen & Barr, 2009; Valent, 1995). Taking care of themselves throughout this type of critical incident was not
a main priority for any of the participants; however, all of the participants recognized the importance of effective coping and self-care and discussed ways they attempted to maintain their own wellness. Several key areas emerged as specific points for deeper discussion: the importance of training and preparation for such events, how to memorialize suicide appropriately, and navigating through the emotional waters and care for responders while avoiding burnout.

**Guiding with Compassion and Addressing Incident-Specific Challenges**

Owens and Garlough (2007) acknowledged, “There are few occasions that demand a greater empathic response or are a more solemn endeavor for university professionals than the death of a student” (p. 27). According to Zdziarski (2006), “While the legal implications of a crisis situation are important, they should not be the primary force driving institutional decisions in crisis response” (p. 14). Focusing on risk management, rather than compassionate care, can create a sense of mistrust of the institution amongst constituents. Additionally, Zdziarski stated, “Conversely, decisions or actions that are taken with the best interests of those affected in mind are also easily recognized, demonstrate a level of compassion on the part of the organizations, and generate a positive impression of the institution” (p. 14).

However, risk management must also be a consideration of senior administrators in student affairs. When a critical incident involving student death occurs, the institution should conduct an assessment that considers any legal implications, because United States society has become highly litigious (Beckham, Pearson, & Melear, 2007). These authors asserted, “While many within a college or university community may experience numbness, disbelief, anger, or denial, there are legal and administrative responsibilities associated with the death of a student that must be addressed by institutional leaders” (p. 189). Kitzrow (2003) also noted that legal challenges, such as accusations of negligence, inadequate mental health services, and timely
notification to families, have created issues for some institutions with regard to mental health services and risk management.

The participants of this study indicated that these incidents might have a significant impact on how SSAOs approach other situations, as well as how they approach future student deaths. The experience of managing student death has affected how these administrators approach working with students, such as being more patient and trying to ensure they always make time to talk with students. Additionally, having managed critical incidents involving student death has altered their approaches in how they craft their messages to students and how they address larger groups of new students.

When working with families during a critical incident that involves the death of one or more students, SSAOs responding to the situation and aiding the families through to recovery may find themselves performing other incident-specific duties that are unique to each situation and family. These unofficial duties may not necessarily be anticipated, or part of their regularly assigned duties, but they are often some of the most important ways administrators can help and support families. For example, Nielsen (2007) suggested, “Although administrators do not have any legal rights to possession, transportation, preparation, or disposal of a dead body, the family of the deceased may ask for assistance in the funeral arrangement process” (p. 70). The author recommended, as the participants did, that administrators also have both a personal and professional understanding of death and dying and the processes involved in what needs to occur in the event of a student death. Being prepared for critical incidents that involve student death is essential to effective response and management.

The Importance of Training and Preparation

In order to manage student death critical incidents effectively, personal and professional preparation and training are essential for those who are or wish to become SSAOs in student
Learning to handle a critical incident as it unfolds is not optimal for anyone involved, and a lack of preparation could lead to liability concerns or litigation for the institution, as the research has suggested. Schwartz and Bryan (1998) argued,

Staff development or personal and professional education programs should be at the heart of a student affairs division committed to quality. Instituting training and development activities and programs for management, support, and student staff should be a mandate rather than a choice. (p. 6)

Participants discussed the idea of continual training by periodically conducting tabletop exercises with professional and paraprofessional staff members and the public safety office or the campus police department. Working together as a staff to consider the steps required to respond to critical incidents that involve various types of student death could help to mitigate the shock they might feel during an actual event. Wilson (2007) proposed, “Training is best when it is active and engaging, not just lecture-based. Participants should be extensively involved—thinking, talking, practicing, revising, and evaluating” (p. 189). She added that training should focus upon incidents that the institution could potentially experience and involve an understanding of current vulnerable areas of the campus.

Similarly, Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008) recommended that faculty members and RAs receive experiential training, where they can be fully immersed as active participants in the process. They acknowledged, “Because of their frequent contact with students, faculty members and RAs should remain abreast of the support services available to students” (p. 55). The continuous reinforcement of this training should also occur in appropriate intervals. However, the training should be a balance of helping constituents to feel prepared in a healthy way, rather than making them fearful that student death might become a regular occurrence on the campus. Training faculty members, in addition to other staff members, and offering resources about social
issues will increase the overall awareness throughout campus, so in the event of a student death, everyone can feel more comfortable and included in the process. This could, in turn, aid in the healing of the community. SSAOs can develop a strong network of primary and secondary responders, which will allow them to focus their energies on the required tasks and taking care of the families.

Griffin (2007a) noted, “Persons responsible for the notification of students or others on campus about the death of significant others need training and practice in this skill” (p. 164). The participants of this study concurred that the training for SSAOs should include practice for how to conduct notification to a family, as well as how to draft a statement that tells the student’s story and includes appropriate quotations from faculty and staff members, or fellow students.

**Memorializing Suicide Appropriately**

Every type of student death brings a particular set of challenges, but a student suicide can be among the most challenging types of death for a campus community to experience, and the emotions generated are uniquely complex. Among young people between the ages of 15-24, suicide is the third leading cause of death, and it is estimated that for every suicide, there are 100 attempts (Cerel, Chandler, & Moore, 2013). These authors noted, “The experience of knowing someone who has attempted or died by suicide is common for college students” (p. 51).

In the aftermath of a student suicide, one key challenge a community faces is making sure the memorializing on campus is not perceived as glorifying the event (Levine, 2008). SSAOs who are leading a small campus through such an event must work to ensure is that the memorializing that takes place on campus appropriately honors the life of the student. The participants acknowledged the struggles they faced with attempting to achieve this type of balance.
According to Jellinek, Bostic, and Schlozman (2007), “Some students, especially those feeling unpopular or isolated, may be drawn to suicide because of the community reaction, which can seem to glorify the deceased student” (p. 80). What student affairs administrators and their staffs must consider and monitor is the issue of contagion, particularly if a student’s suicide could be viewed or is memorialized in a romanticized way. As noted by participants, others who may be contemplating self-harm may take action in the aftermath of a successful suicide, so the possibility of contagion is a very real issue and concern. Levine (2008) suggested, “To minimize contagion, campus memorials might take the form of contributions to mental health and suicide prevention organizations or campus scholarships. Memorial services, if held, should stress the unnecessary nature of the death and provide information related to prevention” (p. 72).

As some of the participants discussed, a situation where a student makes the choice to permanently resolve a temporary set of problems through suicide can be highly frustrating. When a student believes that is the only option available, despite programs and awareness campaigns, a lot of questions arise, particularly, “Why?”

The challenges involved, as well as the personal and professional effects, of suicide were evident from the data that emerged during the course of the interviews. Suicides affected the small campus communities differently than the other types of death. The suicides discussed by the participants clearly generated more professional reflection than other types of death they encountered. Even when students left letters behind explaining their reasons behind this choice, the question of why they made that decision was unanswered. For professionals who are used to resolving issues and concerns, and who are “fixers,” having such a large question remain unanswered goes against who they are as professionals.
Navigating Emotions, Caring for Responders, and Avoiding Burnout

According to Kitzrow (2003), “The increased demand and the severity of student mental health problems may have the most impact on student affairs and counseling center staff, who are on the front lines of dealing with student behavioral problems (p. 173). Key sources of support repeatedly mentioned by the participants included the director of residence life, the director of counseling, and the chaplain. The participants stressed the importance of having trusted colleagues with whom they could process their emotions. Because of the increased complexities of student issues, having strong teams in place within student affairs is essential not only for student welfare, but for the well-being of the staff members responding to these issues.

Additionally, Griffin (2007a) discussed the need for psychological first aid for those on campus who are the primary responders to critical incidents. He stated, “In order to avoid burnout or the development of CS (compassion stress) among crisis responders, administrators of campus crisis intervention services need to take a number of preventative steps” (p. 175). His suggestions echoed those proposed by the literature as well as by the research participants of this study, which included continual training opportunities for staff, the development and revision of strong protocols, maintaining a healthy environment by giving the staff appropriate resources and time away, offering staff members the opportunity to speak with professional counselors, and following up with them periodically.

Being able to process information with others—therapists, colleagues, partners—was proposed by all of the participants as an effective coping strategy. Taking vacation time away, and getting together informally for meals were also discussed as some of the effective coping strategies the senior administrators and their staffs used to support one another and to maintain a healthy balance. Griffin (2007b) noted, “It is important to remember the effects of trauma are cumulative on victims and responders alike. Efforts to minimize the negative aspects of post
intervention reactions are a means of keeping staff healthy and effective” (p. 106). Similarly, Tull (2006) argued, “Certainly, the physical and psychological health of all administrators should be a top priority at all institutions of higher education” (p. 105). The participants received varying levels of support from their institutions during critical incidents that involved student death. However, all participants agreed that institutions should take steps to ensure that staff members who serve as primary responders are supported with resources, time away, relief from regularly assigned duties, and empathy.

Rosser and Javinar (2003) conducted a national study that examined the working life, levels of satisfaction and morale, and intentions to stay or leave among midlevel student affairs professionals. They found, “These student affairs professionals value—more than the other work life issues—the importance of fostering positive relationships with those they interact with; more specifically, they enjoy building positive relationships with colleagues within and between work units” (p. 823). Participants in this study discussed their satisfaction in how their staffs responded, in what they did well, and in how they helped families, and they valued these relationships.

There was great admiration for the work their colleagues had accomplished under stressful circumstances, and the participants praised these collegial relationships that allowed effective management of the incident to occur. The participants also were proud of the work they and their staffs did to aid the families during these difficult situations, and demonstrated a great admiration for the families and their resilience in the face of such personal sadness.

Being able to navigate through not only the emotions of family and community members, but setting aside their own emotional reactions to student death, was a point of discussion for the participants as well. The participants discussed the necessity of setting aside their own emotions, in order to focus on the job throughout the response and recovery periods. The
participants acknowledged that they compartmentalize their emotions, set them aside, or do not experience highs or lows with their emotions, which aids them in their daily work. Staff members who were overcome with emotions ceased being helpful managers of these critical incidents.

However, the participants all also discussed experiencing feelings of grief and sadness when students have died, and physical ailments shortly after such events. There can be triggers well beyond the event and recovery periods that can immediately transport them right back to the time and emotions of the event period. Simply put, for these administrators, critical incidents involving student death are about aiding everyone else who is involved. Thus, while they are the managers, facilitators, and mediators, they do their best to maintain a professional and personal separation from the event.

The SSAOs in this study shared a similar *modus operandi* during these events: they focused very little on their own experiences, thoughts, and emotions regarding the event when the event was unfolding. Because there was much to be done, and always additional incidents to manage in their work for the larger student affairs unit, they processed any emotional reactions when they could, with others they could trust as much as possible, and reflectively observed what they could do differently next time. Once they managed a student death, they possessed the knowledge and the understanding that there very likely *will* be a next time.

**Implications for Practice**

Within the popular Harry Potter series, author J. K. Rowling (2000) explored the issue of student death, and the emotional distress created within a community by the sudden, violent death of a young person in his prime. In his seemingly infinite wisdom, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore addressed why it is necessary to confront negative events that occur, by explaining, “Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery”
Without that understanding and acceptance, it would be difficult for SSAOs to help their students, their staff members, or their communities to move forward toward recovery.

Managing critical incidents that involve student death have some ongoing implications for practice that promote better awareness across campus and stronger professional development, particularly for young professionals who aspire to be senior student affairs administrators at some point in their careers. Practices that support those who respond to such incidents and aid in the recovery of the entire community are also important to develop. Additionally, promoting awareness through social media and meeting students where they are, both developmentally and socially, could foster a stronger and smoother recovery process and aid in the recovery process.

**Training and Mentoring of Young Professionals**

As the participants noted, student affairs professionals often enter the field without a complete understanding of how serious a senior administrative role actually is, until they are faced with certain challenges, such as student death. With senior administrative roles growing increasingly more complex, a key implication for practice with regard to managing critical incidents that involve student death is understanding that there is a strong possibility that it will occur, and it will need to be managed with compassionate guidance and care for all involved. This research supports the premise that more specific training for understanding and preparation for managing student death would be a beneficial addition to the curriculum of graduate programs in college student personal and higher education administration. Diana concurred with this idea, when she talked about how emotional management is not something that is addressed in graduate programs.

Tull (2006) examined the turnover of young professionals that occurs yearly in the student affairs field, due to job dissatisfaction, and argued that high turnover rates can be reduced through effective preparation, supervision, and training. The author noted that there is a
greater chance of retaining a young professional when there is a “synergistic supervisory relationship” (p. 466) with a supervisor. The participants discussed the importance of including younger staff members in the planning and response to critical incidents and the value they had found in learning from good mentors, and in turn, being good mentors. Ringo, Michael, and Diana all specifically discussed the importance of having and being strong mentors to young professionals. Ringo noted how effective he believed it could be for young professionals just to spend time listening to experienced professionals and how they talk to others during critical situations, so that they can learn to appreciate the words and tones of voice that are used.

In addition to ensuring that young professionals receive appropriate training, it is imperative that paraprofessional staff members, such as resident assistants, receive ongoing and appropriate training to prepare them for a student death. Preparing student staff, as well as faculty members, for what they could encounter during a critical incident involving student death offers new ways to expand training and better prepare the entire campus community. Because of the unique roles RAs and faculty members play in the lives of students, providing training for these two groups has positive implications for both practice and preparedness within the community (Servainty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

**Addressing the Emotional Cost of Compassionate Care**

In comparison to other areas of higher education, the field of student affairs has a considerably higher rate of turnover of professionals (Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Developing a supportive working environment is essential for all employees at an institution, particularly those who respond frequently to stressful incidents. Offering better preparation for the emotional toll a student death can take on the primary responders, especially, will aid in the promotion of healing and recovery throughout the entire campus community, because those responding will be able to help and support others more effectively.
All of the participants noted that institutions could do more to provide relief and support to those who are the primary responders to critical incidents that result in student death. Diana indicated that senior administrators at institutions in higher education are not always good understanding the types of support needed by employees. Ellen concurred that support from the top down is essential for addressing the emotional cost for responders, and she suggested that relief from other senior administrators should be incorporated into an institution’s emergency response plan. This research supports the idea that the senior leadership of institutions should better support those who are primary responders to such incidents. Additionally, more comprehensive training and stronger awareness at the senior administrative leadership level could provide more seamless shifts in handling the responsibilities involved to offer some relief at times to SSAOs and their staffs.

**Future Research**

Three main areas of further research emerged from this study: family perceptions of institutional response to student death, experiences of middle managers with student death, and the manner of death involved in a critical incident. Each of these areas were beyond the purview of this study, but the findings in this study suggested that these areas could provide further interesting insights into the experience of college student death. A deeper understanding of how institutions and student affairs administrators have responded to, and could respond better to, such events would also be helpful in guiding practitioners and institutions in their responses. Such research would expand our knowledge and offer more complex insights into how individuals, as well as families, experience this phenomenon and allow us to consider better ways to help not only the families involved but the responders to such events. Additionally, we could gain a deeper understanding of best practices in managing the different nuances involved with the types of death encountered.
Family Perceptions of Institutional Response to Student Death

Because participants consistently referenced working with the families of deceased students, an intriguing area of research would be to understand better families’ perceptions and experiences of working with institutions in the aftermath of losing a child who was attending college at those institutions. This research would offer valuable insights for administrators as to what families found to be important and helpful, as well as what they may have found to be especially challenging or frustrating.

Experiences of Middle Managers with Student Death

Better understanding the experiences of administrators in middle management positions would also be a key area for further research. The consistent references by the participants of this study to the core group of staff members, which included the director of residence life, the counselor, and the chaplain, who provided support and aided in the overall management of these critical incidents suggest interesting possibilities for further exploration.

The use of a survey instrument to reach a larger population with regard to strategies, coping mechanisms, and suggestions for critical incident planning and management that considers student death issues could add to understanding this phenomenon on a wider scale. A survey might deepen our understanding of the experiences of senior or middle management administrators at middle to larger sized institutions. Additionally, that research may be able to elicit on a wider scale the best practices for managing critical incidents. Knowledge of how to manage better a larger range of the types of death that may be encountered at both small campuses and larger institutions could also be gained from such a study.

Manner of Death

Even though a range of the manner of death was covered in this study, homicide was not a manner of death that was included. It would be both interesting and necessary to understand
better the additional aspects of management that would be required during the time between the death of the student and before a perpetrator is apprehended. Mismanagement of a student’s murder at Eastern Michigan University in 2007 led to the firing of the institution’s president, vice president for student affairs, and public safety director for their roles in misrepresenting the fact that the student had been murdered in her room (Lipka, 2007). This situation demonstrated the high stakes involved regarding effective management of student death incidents and the need to have strong protocols and procedures in place, in addition to guiding with compassion and providing accurate information to the community.

In recent years, active shooter situations have received a great deal of focus and media attention. This attention has grown as incidents have continued to occur. However, research other types of homicides that have occurred at college campuses would provide a better view of what SSAOs and their staffs experience. Homicide events may garner a wider range of media attention. A study about the experiences of SSAOs and the difficulties involved of managing their communities would be an interesting avenue for further research. An exploration of the five serial murders within a week in 1990 at the University of Florida, Gainesville, would provide a baseline example, because that situation occurred long before critical incident management involving homicidal student death on campuses was part of the mainstream preparation institutions currently promote. Additionally, the 2010 murder of University of Virginia student-athlete Yeardley Love by her ex-boyfriend, or the more recent shooting on the Tennessee State Campus in October 2015, where a student was killed over a dice game, would also provide insight into the additional challenges involved with working with families, students, and extensive media attention while maintaining a sense of calm amidst circumstances that could induce panic or fear.
Conclusion

The death of a student at a small college campus can be quite a stressful event for a wide range of constituents within the community. For SSAOs and their staffs who are among the primary responders to such critical incidents, these events are among the most challenging situations they can encounter, both personally and professionally. Having to manage a student death drastically underscores for SSAOs just how serious the profession is and how much responsibility is involved. Student deaths can have long-term effects and can generate changes in policies, traditions, programming efforts, and ways of thinking and operating differently for individuals and institutions alike.

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of SSAOs who have managed and coped with student death at small campuses, in order to promote dialogues about types of support, training, and response efforts needed that will aid professionals in their planning for such critical incidents. In reflecting upon his experience as a senior student affairs administrator who has managed four college student deaths, research participant Ringo stated,

Over the course of a career, you get to understand how to deal with certain situations, and I guess having to deal with a student death is kind of the penultimate of situations that a student affairs person would have to kind of interact with. And so, having gotten it over, kind of gives you the background, and gives you the confidence that you can do it. You don’t want to do it, obviously, and it’s gonna be different every time, but I think it gives you a sense of confidence that you can do all the different aspects of the job, from the good to the bad to the ugly.

Participants’ longevity within the field was indicative of their personal and professional resiliency and their continued growth as administrators in an increasingly complex profession. The student affairs profession has a high burnout rate, and without the appropriate support and
guidance, professionals may choose to leave the field if the stress becomes too much. A student death experience could make or break a professional who has considerable experience in the field, much less someone who does not. It takes a person, and a professional, who possesses patience and compassion, a strong and adaptable personality, and who has a resilient spirit to handle the role of senior student affairs administrator.

Senior student affairs administrators are compassionate guides, primary responders, mediators, leaders, guardians, caregivers, educators, and people who can handle being all of those roles, yet who can also handle all other duties resulting from any given experience. There are days in student affairs that are good, days that are bad, and days that are downright ugly, and true learning does not happen on the pretty days. Clearly, this is not a role for everyone, nor should it be.

For a senior student affairs administrator, managing a critical incident involving student death is among the most challenging experiences a professional can have. However, for those who do choose this deeply personal profession; who take the ugly days and make them more palatable for those who need help; who are the “lifers” who can never quite leave the role, even if they leave the profession at some point; for them, this is much more than just a job. It is a grand, wild, challenging, rewarding adventure. In the midst of a student death, they find new beginnings. Through a death, they build new relationships. When a death occurs, they mourn the loss, but celebrate the life. In planning for the next time death occurs, they work to ensure the safety and well-being of others. After a death, they continue to help others to pursue life. Most importantly, perhaps, through the somewhat brutal experience of managing student death, they do, indeed, learn from the experience.
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APPENDIX A. LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

[Date]

Dear Senior Student Affairs Administrator,

To fulfill the dissertation requirement of the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I am examining how senior student affairs administrators on small college campuses manage college student death. This may include how they respond to, cope, and make personal and professional meaning of the experience. I am inviting you to consider participating in this research.

As a participant in the study, you would participate in two in-depth interviews, at the location of your choosing, each lasting about 1-2 hours. Beyond those interviews, I will ask you to review transcripts to ensure they accurately capture the interview. If, at any time, you no longer wish to be considered as a research participant, I will destroy any information I have collected from you. Your confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.

If you are willing to participate, please complete the attached questionnaire to indicate whether you have served as a primary responder to a critical incident which resulted in college student death, while serving as a senior student affairs administrator at a small college campus. If you agree to participate, I will contact you to arrange interviews. I plan to conduct them in July and August.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. During the interview, you may decide to skip a question, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or explanation. Information you provide will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed. Each participant will create a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from all transcripts. Quotations from the interviews using a pseudonym will be used when reporting the results. A list of pseudonyms and real names will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the primary investigator. Each interview will be recorded digitally and transcribed. The audio files and transcription files will be kept in a password-protected computer until the completion of the study, at which point these files will be destroyed.

All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the dissertation chair may review redacted transcripts.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those encountered in normal daily life. Individual participants may benefit from participation in this study because they will have the opportunity to reflect on their ability to effectively manage acute crises and student death on their campuses.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact me, Lisa M. Kirchner, at (567) 207-5462 or lkirchn@bgsu.edu, or Dr. Maureen Wilson, my dissertation chair, at (419)
372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of this study. Thank you for your time.

If you are willing to participate, please respond by returning the enclosed questionnaire to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided, and I will contact you by phone to confirm your availability for the study and to schedule the interviews.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Kirchner
lkirchn@bgsu.edu
APPENDIX B. INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Have you ever experienced having to manage the aspects involved with college student death while you have been the senior student affairs administrator at a small college campus with a population of 5000 and under?

_____YES_____NO

How long have you served as a senior student affairs administrator?

_____ Years

What type of college student death have you encountered? (Please check all that apply):

_____ Accidental
_____ Illness
_____ Suicide
_____ Homicide
_____ Other (Please specify: _______________)

Would you be willing to participate in a study of the experiences of collegiate senior student affairs administrators with the phenomenon of managing college student death by being interviewed about your experience?

_____YES_____NO

Please fill out the information below:

Name: _____________________________________________________________

Current Institution: ___________________________________________________

Contact Information:

Address: ___________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________

Email:  ___________________________________________________________

Phone:  ___________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C. LETTER OF HSRB APPROVAL

DATE: December 5, 2013

TO: Lisa Kirchner, PhD
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [514231-2] Managing Student Death at the Small College Campus: Experiences of Senior Student Affairs Administrators

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: December 5, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: November 6, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 5-10 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 6, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrbo@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
You are invited to participate in a research study on college student death. As part of my work on a doctorate in Higher Education Administration in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I am conducting a study on the experiences of senior student affairs administrators with regard to the college student death aspect of campus critical incident management.

**Purpose of the Study**
The purpose of this study is to examine how senior student affairs administrators on small college campuses manage college student death. By examining a phenomenon that we know senior student affairs administrators experience, and learning how others manage the various aspects of these critical events in the student affairs field, we will be able to equip professionals with tools that will help them to be successful, if and when they are faced with these responsibilities. This may include how they respond to, cope, and make personal and professional meaning of the experience.

**Procedure**
Participants must have served as the senior student affairs administrator at a small college campus with a population of 5000 and under. As a participant in this study, your involvement will consist of participation in two recorded interviews lasting approximately 1-2 hours each. The first interview will take place at a location of your choosing. The second interview will take place during data analysis, also at a location of your choosing. Prior to the second interview, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your first interview and will be asked to provide corrections and/or any feedback. In the second interview, you will be asked to review my interpretations of the data collected during the first interview. You will also receive a transcript of the second interview, and again, will be asked to provide corrections and/or any feedback. The total expected time on your part for participation in this study will be approximately 6-8 hours. This includes the two interviews, your reviews of the transcripts and findings, and any email exchanges.

**Voluntary Nature of Study**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the project at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue at any time, and all information with regard to your involvement will be destroyed completely and appropriately to ensure your privacy. If you decide to withdraw from the project at any point, none of your information will be utilized in any way for this study. Deciding not to participate will in no way affect your current or future relationship with Bowling Green State University or with any institution involved in the research.

**Confidentiality Protection**
Information you provide will remain confidential. Your identity and the name of your institution will not be revealed. Each participant will create a pseudonym and personal identifiers (including the name of your campus) will be removed from all transcripts. Quotations from the interviews using a pseudonym will be used when reporting the results. Your current institutional affiliation, and the institution with whom you were affiliated at the time of the critical incident involving college student death (if different from your current institution), will be protected in the reporting of the findings with the use of minimal description. A list of pseudonyms and real names (i.e., names of campuses and participants) will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the primary investigator.

Hard copies of the data will be protected in a locked file, and data stored in computer files, including audio-recorded files, will be stored in a password protected computer and external hard drive. The researcher will be the primary person to have access to the data, but may, on occasion, need to share portions of the data with the dissertation chair, primarily, or with members of the committee only, in order to consult with them. The data will be properly and completely destroyed after the completion of the study, in order to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Correspondence through email will be kept to a minimum, as email is not 100% secure.

**Risks/Benefits**

This study is about the unique lived experiences of senior student affairs administrators with regard to a critical incident that occurred during their time serving in the capacity as a senior administrator with the responsibility for managing critical incidents involving student death. You will be interviewed regarding an incident that may have been quite stressful for you, both personally and professionally, and your narratives will be treated with the utmost respect and care by the researcher. Risk to the participant is minimal.

There may be hesitation involved in addressing this sensitive or difficult topic, particularly if you are still at the same institution and suffered environmental stress. Additionally, the incident you choose to discuss may be recognizable, and confidentiality and discretion will need to be maintained. However, because the focus of the inquiry is on what senior student affairs administrators experienced personally and professionally, the incident itself will not be under examination. Some participants may be willing to allow their real names to be utilized; separate discussions with each participant will occur to confirm their choice with regard to this ethical dilemma. You will be provided with information on your institution’s Employee Assistance Program, and/or community resources, should you determine that participation in this research will require you to do some additional processing with a professional counselor at a time beyond your participation in this study.

**Contact Information**

If, at any time, there are questions or concerns with regard to the research, or your participation in the research, please feel free to contact me, Lisa M. Kirchner at 567.207.5462 or lkirchn@bgsu.edu or Dr. Maureen Wilson, my dissertation advisor, at 419.372.7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419.372.7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in
this research or if any problems or concerns arise during the course of this study. Thank you for your time and your participation in this study.

Signing this consent form indicates that you have read the form and understand that you have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. You have had the opportunity to have your questions answered, and you have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research by signing two copies of this document, one for the researcher’s files, and one for me to keep.

____________________________________Date: ________/_________/2014
Participant Signature

Participant Name – Print: ____________________________________________
APPENDIX E. RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Name of research participant: __________________________________________________________

Preferred alias for the study (if desired): ________________________________________________

If no alias is preferred, only your first name will be utilized. Please initial here if you do not wish to utilize an alias: __________

Mailing address:  _______________________________________________________
  _______________________________________________________
  _______________________________________________________

Phone number: _______-_______-_______

Secondary phone number: _______-_______-_______

Email: _________________________________________

Name of institution relevant to the experience: __________________________________________

City: _________________________________________ State: __________________

Note: This information will be stored in a separate file and kept in a locked file. Upon completion of this study, this document will be destroyed completely.
APPENDIX F. QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Initial Interview

Background:

Please tell me about your professional background and your path to your current role.

What is your academic background?

The Experience:

Can you discuss a time when you had to manage the aspects surrounding college student death while serving in the senior administrative role in student affairs at a small campus?

What should I know about you that will aid me in better understanding your experience?

Why did you choose this particular story to tell?

What was the scope and length of your involvement with this incident?

What were the challenges for you when dealing with college student death?

What did this event mean for you personally?

What did this event mean for you professionally in your role as the senior administrator in student affairs?

What aspects and people related to this event stand out for you?

Emotional Reactions:

What feelings did you experience during this event?

What feelings did you experience after this event…currently with regard to this event?

Are there particular emotions or images that stand out for you?

In what ways was your personal behavior affected as a result of this event?

How did your professional behavior change as a result of experiencing this event?

In what ways did you experience grief with regard to this incident?

Follow-Up Interview
Coping Mechanisms and Strategies:

What were sources of stress for you during and/or after this event?

What did you do to manage your emotional involvement in the situation?

What coping mechanisms did you employ?

Did you seek professional counseling? Why or why not?

Support:

What were your main sources of support during this time?

What types of personal support did you receive?

In what ways did your institution offer support?

What Was Learned:

What did you learn about yourself personally as a result of this experience?

What did you learn about yourself as a professional as a result of this experience?

In what ways has this event had a lasting impact for you personally? Professionally?

What were your sources of satisfaction with regard to managing this incident?

What made you proud about this experience?

Closure and Moving Forward:

In what way have you achieved some “closure” with regard to this situation?

In what ways has this experience affected your personal decisions with regard to this professional role?

Recommendations:

What recommendations do you have for those who plan to become deans of students regarding preparation for the possibility of experiencing this phenomenon?

What recommendations do you have for institutions with regard to the campus first responders to deal with critical incidents where student death is a result?
Is there anything else you would like to add?