

DEATH, TRANSITION, AND RESILIENCE:  
A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE OF BEREAVED COLLEGE  
STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

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This study used narrative inquiry to focus on the lived experiences of undergraduate and graduate students who have experienced a significant death loss during their studies and have academically persisted in the face of adversity. The purpose of this research was to understand and describe how undergraduate and graduate students academically persist within higher education after a significant death loss. Providing this affirmative narrative illuminated the educational resilience that occurs following a death loss experience. Using educational resilience as the conceptual model and Schlossberg's transition theory as the theoretical framework, the overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity?

Participants included seven undergraduate and graduate students from three institutions of higher education across the United States. Participants engaged in two semi-structured interviews and an electronic journaling activity to share their death loss experience. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtually.

Composite narratives were used to present the data from this study. The seven participants in this study were highlighted through four composite characters who met monthly at a Death Café. Findings revealed challenges that bereaved students experienced, including how their bond and relationship to the deceased were not always acknowledged by outsiders. Additionally, the distance from one's support systems and a lack of finances often created obstacles to grieve and mourn. Most participants experienced more than one death loss, but often

expressed a deep loss that was at the forefront of their narrative. Lastly, all participants shared how they were able to push through and persevere with their academics following their death loss. This research contributes to the growing literature on bereaved college students in higher education.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Gail Mieko Urabe and Clifford Kazuo Urabe.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

*“The flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of them all.”*

*– Walt Disney Company, Mulan*

Going to college is often thought of as an exciting time in an individual’s life and the start of many new opportunities. Although individuals do not associate the college experience as a time when students experience the death loss of a loved one (Cintrón, 2007), this is a common yet often understated aspect of the college student experience. Over the past few decades, studies have shown that bereavement among students attending higher education is more prevalent than previously thought (Balk, 1997; Balk et al., 2010). A study by Cox, Dean, and Kowalski (2015) indicated that nearly 60% of undergraduate students experience the death loss of at least one family member or friend by the time they reach their senior year.

Scholars who have studied college student bereavement often found that their participants experienced a decline in their educational performance following a death loss (Balk, 2001; Balk 2008; Balk, 2011; Battle et al., 2013; Servaty-Sieb & Hamilton, 2006). Although these findings are important in understanding an aspect of the bereaved college student experience, most of these studies have centered on undergraduate students and have not included graduate student experiences. Additionally, a sizeable number of these studies have been situated within a deficit perspective, focusing on the poor outcomes and challenges that individuals experience following a death loss rather than providing a resilient view of the bereaved student experience.

This study uses narrative inquiry to focus on the lived experiences of undergraduate and graduate students who have experienced a significant death loss during their current studies and have academically persisted in the face of adversity. This research centers on academic persistence because, as Tinto (2017) asserted, students are not interested in being retained. They are interested in “persisting to degree completion even if it means transferring to another



institution or taking a nested sub-degree to eventually do so” (Tinto, 2017, p. 2). Using educational resilience as the conceptual model and Schlossberg’s transition theory as the theoretical framework, the overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity?

In this manuscript, academically persisting was defined as maintaining a 2.0 term and cumulative grade point average (GPA) while staying enrolled in courses during the term of the death loss through the time that I interviewed participants. The policies at all three institutions where participants were studying stated that a 2.0 or higher GPA was needed to be in good academic standing for undergraduate students to graduate with a degree from their institutions. The 2.0 or higher GPA requirement also applied to graduate student participants, even though graduate students needed a 3.0 or higher GPA to be considered in good academic standing with their institution. My rationale for this decision was that I wanted to hear the narratives of bereaved students who were making adequate progress towards their degree requirements and who had an overall GPA that made them eligible to earn a degree, which all graduate student participants had met.

Recruitment of participants occurred through both purposeful and referral sampling from three separate institutions of higher education: a public, West regional institution; a private, West regional institution; and a public, Midwest regional institution. To be selected for this study, participants needed to meet the following criteria: (1) be at least 18 years old; (2) experienced a death loss that was significant to them while they were in enrolled; (3) experienced their death loss at least two years ago from the start of the study; and (4) maintained a 2.0 or higher term and cumulative GPA since the death loss. In addition to these four requirements, the Institutional Review Board at the private institution in the West region of the United States also required that

participants must have scored between 1-10 on the Beck Depression Inventory, which is a self-report that measures characteristic attitudes and symptoms of depression (Beck et al., 1961) and submitted an Interested Subjects Questionnaire.

### **Background of the Study**

Scholars who have studied bereavement in higher education have suggested that a sizeable number of students experience a death loss while enrolled in college. After reviewing data from the United States and Europe, Balk (2008) stated that “at any given time, 22 to 30 percent of college undergraduates are in the first twelve months of grieving the death of a family member or friend” (p. 5). Studies conducted at Kansas State University, the University of Arizona, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Memphis, indicated that “35-48% [of undergraduates] are in the first 24 months [of grieving the death of a family member or friend]” (Balk, 2001, p. 69). Researchers later suggested that approximately “25% to 30% of college students are in the first year of bereavement and that between 40% and 50% are within the first two years of experiencing the death of a family member or friend” (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010, p. 947). Most recently, Cox, Dean, and Kowalski (2015) presented findings from a multi-institutional, longitudinal survey of 3,418 racially diverse college students. These scholars suggested that the number of grieving students is higher than previously reported. About 30% to 36% of students mentioned that they had lost a friend or family member during their first year in college, and nearly 60% of college seniors experienced at least one death loss since the beginning of their collegiate journey (Cox et al., 2015). These findings demonstrate that as students’ progress through their postsecondary journeys, it is likely that they or someone who they know will experience the death loss of someone they are close to, such as a family member or friend.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Publications about student bereavement in higher education first began to appear in the 1980s. LaGrand (1981) was one of the first scholars to publish comprehensive empirical data regarding college student bereavement. Following LaGrand's work, scholars such as Sklar and Hartley (1990) acknowledged that bereaved students were a hidden population on college and university campuses and that the grief that these students experience remains a hidden reality. To this day, bereaved college students remain a relatively understudied group within higher education.

Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) have said that "college students are an understudied population of griever with unique challenges that have not been fully explored" (p. 950). One explanation for why bereaved college students are referred to by Sklar and Hartley (1990) as a hidden population is because it is often difficult to identify these individuals unless they choose to disclose their death loss experience to others. However, opening up to others about a death loss may be difficult for some students when:

[T]he relationship to the deceased is unknown to others (such as an undisclosed same-sex partner) or is deemed not close enough (such as the sibling of a person one is dating) or important enough (such as the death of a recently acquired friend or a miscarriage) to warrant grieving. (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008, p. 52)

Additionally, bereaved students who sought out resources such as counseling and psychological services may have disguised their grief with symptoms such as having difficulties with concentration, experiencing a loss of motivation, or having insomnia, without ever mentioning that they experienced a death loss (Hardison et al., 2005).

Although scholarship on college student bereavement continues to emerge, the current literature about these students has highlighted how a death loss can negatively impact their educational performance and college persistence (Balk, 2008; Balk, 2011; Balk et al., 1993; Bonanno, 2005; Servaty-Sieb & Hamilton, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2007). Balk and colleagues (2010) wrote: “Bereavement places college students at risk of doing poorly in their academics, dropping out of school or being expelled, and undermining career development...” (p. 461). Although these statements may be valid to a certain extent, it is also important to acknowledge bereaved college students who have academically persisted in the face of this type of adversity. Providing this affirmative narrative would demonstrate that negative academic results are not the only outcome of a death loss experience.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand and describe how undergraduate and graduate students academically persist within higher education after a significant death loss. Using educational resilience as the conceptual model and Schlossberg’s theory of transition as the theoretical framework, the overarching research question that guided this study was: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity? Supplemental research questions to explore this topic included:

- How does a death loss shape students’ experiences of college?
- What types of support systems do college students use during their bereavement?
- What drives students to continue their educational goals?

### **Significance of the Study**

According to Kurose (2015), student success in higher education has become an important issue for individuals such as policy makers, educators, business leaders, parents, and

students for a plethora of reasons, including economic advancement, career aspirations, accreditation, reputation, and more. However, “experiencing the death of someone close often affects college students’ overall functioning and may hinder their ultimate success” (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019, p. 240). Students who experience a death loss have grief reactions that alter their cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, physical, and spiritual development (Balk, 2011). These obstacles may jeopardize a bereaved student’s academic performance and persistence (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Balk, 2011; Balk et al., 2001; Osterweis & Townsend, 1988; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2007). Due to this hidden identity, these individuals tend to slip under the radar and go undetected, which leads grieving students to feel isolated, less connected, and lacking support (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Death loss experiences impact a substantial number of students on college and university campuses. Experiencing this type of loss may be a traumatic and pivotal time for students who are away from their typical support systems. It may also be difficult for bereaved students to process the death loss while trying to balance their academic responsibilities. Consequently, bereaved students may struggle in silence and mask what they are going through (Hardison et al., 2005).

The bereaved college student experience is not widely known or discussed within higher education. It would be beneficial for researchers, institutional administrators, and policymakers to seek out and listen to the narratives from bereaved college students so that their voices are heard and their experiences are acknowledged and their needs are met. This information may inform academic, personal, and social interventions that will strategically and holistically support bereaved students so that they can persist with their studies and become better connected to their institution.

This study is particularly significant because it approaches this topic with a resilience-based framework to better capture the holistic view of the bereaved college student experience. The majority of scholarship on this topic has been written from a deficit perspective, focusing on the adverse outcomes that individuals experience following a death loss (Balk, 2001, Balk, 2008; Balk, 2011; Balk et al., 2001; Osterweis & Townsend, 1988; Servaty-Sieb & Hamilton, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2007). Losing a loved one may create challenges that cause some students to perform poorly or leave higher education all-together. Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) found that when compared to their non-grieving peers, bereaved students are at a higher risk of leaving college. However, some students persist academically, and it is vital to share these narratives as well.

Additionally, it is essential to understand the bereaved experiences of both undergraduate and graduate students. Most of the scholarship on bereaved students within higher education has excluded the voices of graduate students. Therefore this study incorporated participants who were at different stages of their higher education journey from those who were in their undergraduate experience to those who were in their master's and doctoral programs.

### **Organization of the Study**

This manuscript is composed of six chapters. Chapter I, the introduction, includes the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the questions that guided this research. Chapter II, the literature review, focuses on areas such as theories about grief and mourning, death loss and culture, and death loss and college students. Also presented is the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study. Chapter III, the methodology, presents the philosophical framework and rationale for choosing narrative inquiry. This chapter addresses ethical issues, the trustworthiness of the study, and the role of the researcher. Chapter IV, participant profiles,

introduces the seven participants who engaged in this study and provides their narratives as bereaved college students on their college campuses. Chapter V presents the findings from this study using a composite narrative that describes the experiences of participants in this study. Finally, the study concludes with Chapter VI, which includes a discussion of the study. This chapter also outlines the study's limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research. Chapter VI concludes with final thoughts about the study.

## CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Levine and Dean (2012), 33% of college students fail to persist through higher education. One group of students who may be at risk of performing poorly in their academics are college students who have experienced a death loss of a family member or friend (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Balk, 2011; Balk et al., 1993; Battle et al., 2013; Servaty-Sieb & Hamilton, 2006; Stroebe et al., 2007). Although scholars have documented the adverse effects of experiencing a death loss, there remains limited information on the experience of college students who academically persist after such a traumatic experience. What are the factors and circumstances that allow some bereaved college students to academically persist when many scholars suggest that this is an atypical experience?

This chapter provides an overview of the scholarship conducted on this subject matter. First, the terminology used throughout this manuscript is defined. Also incorporated into this chapter are theories on grief and mourning, discussion of customs and rituals, and research findings on bereaved college students. This chapter concludes with the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that guide this study. Although this research study focuses on both bereaved undergraduate and graduate students, the majority of scholarship within this literature review has centered on full-time, undergraduate students, unless otherwise noted.

### **Terminology**

Individuals may experience multiple types of losses throughout their lives. Losing a friendship, breaking up with a partner, and losing a job are just a few examples. However, a death loss, which is a loss that occurs by death, is a universal experience that many will face, perhaps multiple times, during a lifetime. Although the death of a pet is also considered a death loss (Podrazik et al., 2000), the focus of this study centers on the death loss of human beings.



Another common term when talking about death is bereavement. Bereavement describes a “situation of having recently lost a significant person through death” (Hedman, 2012, p. 915). Bereaved individuals typically experience grief and mourning following a death loss. Grief is “the primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death” (Stroebe et al., 2008, p. 5). This process involves several reactions as the bereaved individual readjusts to a world where the deceased is no longer physically present (Stroebe et al., 2007). Mourning, on the other hand, is a term that demonstrates how one expresses their grief through culturally-informed practices (Schoulte, 2011; Wolfelt, 2006).

As this research study is situated within higher education, there are some terms that I use interchangeably throughout this manuscript. Words such as post-secondary education, college, and university, all refer to one’s educational experience beyond high school. Additionally, ‘graduate student’ is an umbrella term that I use for individuals who are enrolled in a post-baccalaureate degree program.

### **Death and Society**

In the nineteenth century, death was a familiar presence in American life. It was common for people of all ages to die in their homes rather than in hospitals. Additionally, bodies of the deceased were often displayed and viewed by others in homes rather than funeral parlors (Kamerman, 1988). Much has changed over time due to medical advances and prolonged life expectancies. Within the United States, the Social Security Act of 1935 introduced federal funding for health insurance, retirement packages, and long-term care facilities for the elderly. This passage resulted in individuals being primarily cared for by the hospital, long-term care, and hospice staff. Instead of dying in homes, about 22% of Americans now die in long-term care facilities (Corr & Corr, 2013). Society has adjusted by normalizing practices such as having

outside parties care for those who are nearing death to family members hiring funeral homes to manage the body of the deceased. This shift has made death and dying a more distant part of our everyday lives in comparison to what life looked like in the past.

Scholars Agrawal and Ezekiel (2002) commented that despite medical advances, death in modern, advanced societies may seem undignified:

Terminally ill patients are connected to tubes and machines; they experience pain, shortness of breath, and other excruciating symptoms; they are unable to get out of bed, feed themselves, and even go to the bathroom alone; they are cared for in impersonal institutions. In such circumstances, there is no way to maintain dignity in the dying process. (p. 1997)

These unseemly details are not always shared widely in public. Discussion about death and dying has been viewed as a somewhat taboo or inappropriate subject to discuss in certain circles (Gorer, 1965), which is why these conversations are often avoided (Ruitenbeek, 1973). There are even some scholars who have said that it seems as if some Americans have sealed themselves off from death (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991). As Becvar (2001) stated, “[W]e fear death, we deny death, and all too often we do anything we can to avoid getting too close to it until we are confronted with the loss of a loved one” (p. xi). However, the reality is that many of us will lose one or multiple significant people in our lifetime because “only those who die young escape the pain of losing someone they love through death” (Osterweis & Townsend, 1988, p.1).

Views about death continue to change over time, and people’s interest in death and dying have become more present in recent years (Becvar, 2001). The internet has allowed individuals who are fascinated with death to learn more about this subject matter and share their thoughts through various social media outlets (Brubaker et al., 2013). Additionally, thanatology, which is

“research spanning all aspects of death, dying and bereavement, including end-of-life care” (Borgstrom & Ellis, 2017, p. 93), has become a growing and recognized field for many professionals who address these areas in their work (Chapple et al., 2017).

Death Cafés have also been a space where people discuss death, dying, and bereavement. Death Cafés originated in Switzerland in 2004 under the name Café Mortel and have expanded into more than 48 countries, including the United States (Morgan, 2017). Described as pop-up events, Death Cafés create a warm and inviting environment by offering refreshments such as cakes, cookies, and beverages (Miles & Corr, 2017). Conversations in these spaces often become personal very quickly as people open up about their thoughts and experiences surrounding the topic of death.

### **How People Die**

Multiple labels and descriptions have been used to help people understand how someone died. First, the timing of one’s death can be categorized as anticipated, unanticipated, or a blend of these two, depending on the situation. Anticipated deaths, also known as expected deaths, presents an opportunity for “everyone involved to assimilate to what is happening, to realign beliefs if appropriate or necessary, and to make plans for a future without the person who is dying” (Becvar, 2001 p. 12). Knowing in advance that someone is nearing death may provide some preparation for the inevitable. However, even anticipated deaths may not prepare individuals for the feelings that come after the death loss (Staudacher, 1987). Unanticipated deaths, also referred to as sudden deaths, occur when someone dies without warning, and no one can prepare for the event (Becvar, 2001). There may be some overlap with anticipated and unanticipated deaths when it is logical that someone might die based on the surrounding circumstances but dies sooner than expected. This death loss may cause bereaved individuals to

lack the closure that they are looking for, which may result in guilt and unresolved conflicts (Becvar, 2001).

Forensic pathologists are medical doctors who perform autopsies by examining and analyzing the human body for abnormalities or evidence of disease or infection (Santiago, 2018). After reviewing the deceased, the pathologist will determine the cause of death. Typically, the circumstances that surround the cause of death will result in four manners of death: natural causes, homicide, accidental death, and suicide (Claridge, 2017).

### **Natural Causes**

Natural causes of death describe when a death happens due to internal factors, such as a medical condition or disease (Rettner, 2017). According to Claridge (2017), a natural cause of death is:

Quite simply when the body ceases to function of its own accord or there are mitigating medical factors such as terminal illness, heart disease or the like, which would bring about death- this is generally referred to as death by natural causes. (para.

2)

Examples of death from natural causes could include heart disease, illness, or infection.

According to Storrs (2019), most deaths are due to natural causes; accidents, suicides, and homicides account for fewer than 10% of total deaths.

### **Homicide**

Claridge (2017) defined homicide as:

The taking of one human life by another human being by means of pre-meditated murder.

The term pre-meditated means to have purposefully planned and executed the murder of

another human being in cold blood whilst trying to elude capture by the authorities. (para. 3)

Staudacher (1987) stated that most survivors whose loved one died by homicide have more severe reactions than survivors of individuals who died from natural causes. Severe reactions may include anger and frustration for injustices, when violent and wrongful deaths occur (Becvar, 2001).

### **Accidental Death**

Accidental deaths are typically described as sudden, expected or premature (Staudacher, 1987). Under these circumstances, survivors may be left with traumatic experiences due to the unforeseen event. Claridge (2017) elaborated on this definition by saying that accidental deaths are:

[T]he death of an individual by means other than natural death, murder or suicide.

Accidental death can sometimes be manslaughter- murder but committed out of an involuntary act of violence towards another. Likewise, accidental death can also be categorised as death by misadventure. This means that the victim has died by accident either whilst doing something they should not have been doing or by taking risks that would put them in mortal danger. (para. 4)

Accidental deaths could result from everyday occurrences such as falling down the stairs, or choking on food. Examples of death by misadventure could entail individuals who have died due to their involvement with extreme sports and hobbies.

## **Suicide**

The fourth manner in which a person experiences death is by suicide. The American Psychological Association states that suicide accounts for about 2% of all deaths (“Suicide,” n.d.). According to Claridge (2017), suicide is:

The deliberate taking of one’s own life due to extreme emotional distress often brought about by severe depression. Suicide is neither accidental nor is it classified as death by misadventure simply because the individual has set about on a course of action that would end with their own inevitable death. (para. 5)

Examples of suicide could include intentionally overdosing on drugs, cutting one’s wrists, using firearms, asphyxiation, and death from sudden impact, such as being hit from a moving vehicle or deliberately jumping from a high building. Regardless of the manner of death, the deceased often leave behind family members and friends. Therefore, the next section of this manuscript outlines the survivors’ death loss experiences.

### **Survivors and their Death Loss Experiences**

According to Corr and Corr (2013), individuals are “born into and raised within a context in which cultural, social, religious, and ethnic factors influence his or her life” (p. 8). It is these factors that shape each person’s views of and interactions with death and dying. Therefore regardless of when or how a person dies, survivors are often left with their own unique death loss experiences and varied reactions.

### **Adjusting to the Death Loss**

Individuals often go through a period of adjustment after they encounter a significant death loss (LaGrand, 1985). When someone dies, survivors typically experience a complex range of emotions. These emotions may include “sadness about the loss, gratitude that suffering has

ended for the dying person, relief that there will now be a respite for the caregivers, and guilt about what are perfectly normal, if mixed reactions” (Becvar, 2001, p. 12). Although people vary in how quickly they recover from their grief, most individuals tend to experience the worst grief within the first year of the death loss, which then gradually declines (Baker, 2001; Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001). However, the following year(s) may be just as or more difficult than the first, especially on “holidays, important family events, and the time of the year when the death occurred” (Osterweis & Townsend, 1998, p. 4).

### **Normal and Healthy Reactions to Death Loss**

According to Osterweis and Townsend (1988), a typical bereavement experience entails the “recovery of lost functions (including taking an interest in current life, hopefulness, and the capacity for enjoyment), adaptation to new roles and statuses, and completion of acute grieving” (p. 8). Healthy responses can show up as benefit finding, which is when the bereaved find meaning or positive outcomes from the death loss (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Examples of benefit finding could include developing a deeper appreciation for life, placing a greater emphasis on loved ones, increased spirituality, and enhancing their emotional strength (Boyratz et al., 2010; Oltjenbruns, 1991). Resilience, adaptation, and positive changes in life goals and priorities are also outcomes of benefit finding (Edmonds & Hooker, 1992; Neimeyer, 2006).

### **Poor Bereavement Outcomes**

Studies have revealed that bereaved individuals have higher rates of insomnia and report higher complicated grief scores than their non-bereaved counterparts (Hardison et al., 2005). Individuals who have experienced the death loss of someone close to them may be more vulnerable to long-term adverse outcomes (Osterweis & Townsend, 1998). For instance, survivors who encounter a sudden and traumatic death loss may have a difficult time adjusting to

a world without the person who died, and may experience complicated forms of grief (Cox et al., 2015; Kaltman & Bonanno, 2003; Michael & Snyder, 2007; Prigerson, 2004; Schnider et al., 2007). As Michael and Snyder (2007) described, “many of the thoughts and images about the deceased are upsetting and come unbidden, resulting in yet more sadness and grief. The individuals cannot find any meaning in the death and are plagued by continuing ruminations about the loss” (p. 456). According to Balk et al. (2011), “various terms have been proposed for this phenomenon: ‘traumatic grief,’ ‘pathological grief,’ ‘complicated grief,’ and ‘complicated mourning’ are some of the more common terms” (p. 206).

According to Bonanno (2005), “Some people have such strong and enduring reactions that they are unable to function normally for years afterward” (p. 135). The inability to make sense of a death loss has been suggested to cause distress, guilt, agitated depression, chronic grief and illness, and guilt in survivors. Additionally, violent bereavement outcomes such as suicide, homicide, and accidents due to complicated grief may occur with some survivors (Balk et al., 1993; Neimeyer et al., 2006).

With extreme cases of grief, individuals may be diagnosed with major depressive disorder, which is “if the depressive symptoms endure longer than 2 months or are marked by significantly disrupted functioning, suicidal ideation, psychotic symptoms, psychomotor retardation, or extreme feelings of worthlessness” (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001, p. 707). Posttraumatic stress disorder can also occur when death loss survivors exhibit thoughts and feelings that are intense and disturbing (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001). Unlike healthy bereavement outcomes, Boyraz and colleagues (2010) stated that individuals who primarily focus on the negative aspects of a death loss may find benefit finding to be more difficult.



## **Responding to the Bereaved**

Knowing the right thing to say when someone loses a loved one does not always come naturally to all individuals. There is often a level of uncertainty when it comes to how individuals should respond to someone who is grieving. However, unintentional comments and unwanted advice may come across to the bereaved individual as being insensitive (Aoun et al., 2018). Pogue (2019) provided a few points to consider when responding to bereaved individuals: (1) It is not about you; (2) There is no bright side; (3) Be careful with religion; and (4) Let them feel. Essentially, Pogue (2019) cautioned readers that although their comments could be well-intentioned, they may land poorly and cause more harm. Even well-intentioned offers such as asking if the person needs anything could be viewed by some as an empty gesture. This commonly used phrase places the responsibility on the bereaved individual to seek help, which they may feel reluctant to do. However, there are several things that people can do to show their care and concern for the bereaved individual. This could include offering a hug, providing food, being available to listen when they want to talk, and connecting with the individual, especially during significant times of the year such as during the holidays (Pogue, 2019).

Providing photos, anecdotes, and memorials that the bereaved can refer to when they are mentally and emotionally ready can also be a thoughtful gesture. Photos and videos have often served as a time capsule to remember individuals who have died. However, constant reminders of the deceased may not be helpful for those who have recently experienced a death loss.

## **Death Loss and Culture**

When discussing how individuals respond to death, it is crucial to consider the multiple cultural lenses through which people view the world. Doughty and Hoskins (2011) explained that “perceived rules and roles of each element of one’s culture (e.g., ethnicity, gender, geographic

location) can be powerful agents in shaping thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during a time of grief” (p. 28). Therefore, how one experiences a death loss and the death-related events that follow is dependent upon many different factors, including the individual’s background, upbringing, culture, and personal experiences.

### **Customs and Rituals**

Kalish (1980) said that one’s culture and background might inform several death loss practices, including handling the body of the deceased to various funeral and burial rituals. Certain customs may also determine specific mourning practices, including how long the living should mourn the dead (Lopez, 2011; Parks, 1987). Additionally, cultures may have a perspective on whether or not people should engage in continuing bonds with the deceased (Bonnano et al., 2002). Although some cultures may view the presence of a deceased loved one as helpful and comforting, other cultures may view this presence as “dangerous to the living or dangerous if the proper rituals are not practiced” (Rosenblatt, 2013, p. 123). These varied cultures, rituals, and beliefs show that death is a very individualized experience with many intricate layers. Therefore, having a general idea about these mores may provide more insight into how an individual responds to death.

### **Culture and Family**

The United States Census Bureau defines family as “any two or more people (not necessarily including a householder residing together, and related by birth, marriage, or adoption” (United States Census Bureau, 2019, Family section, para. 15). Unfortunately, this definition does not encompass how all individuals define the term “family.” Beauregard et al. (2009) asserted that rigid definitions of family may exclude “many familial type relationships

based on cultures, customs, and individual choices among people who are not related by birth, marriage, or adoption, such as unmarried same- or opposite-sex partners” (p. 46).

Currently, more constructionist definitions of family and families of choice exist to include relationships that extend beyond biological or conjugal relationship boundaries (Bengtson, 2001; Hull & Ortyl, 2019). However, not everyone accepts or legitimizes this expanded view of the family. Consequently, this may present obstacles for bereaved individuals when policies and procedures align with more traditional definitions of family.

### **Religion and Spirituality**

Religion and spirituality provide comfort to some individuals by helping them to reduce their anxiety and have a higher acceptance of death and dying (Feldman et al., 2016; Kim & Goldstein, 2017). According to Lattanzi-Licht (2013), religious or spiritual ideas of immortality and a belief of an afterlife can comfort individuals who are near death as well as provide peace to family and friends. However, there are vast differences among religions and how they respond to death. Various faiths and cultures approach life and death differently. For example, Hinduism believes that life is cyclical and that after one dies, they are rebirthed into a new identity. In contrast, Christianity recognizes only one death in which one’s spirit goes to heaven or hell (Gire, 2014). According to Gire (2014), Buddhism and some Native American tribes believe that the dead and the living co-exist with one another.

Although there may be multiple ways of viewing death and the afterlife, religion and spirituality have offered comfort for some individuals during difficult times. On the other hand, individuals who experience a tragic or unsettling death loss may see a decline in their religious beliefs (Balk, 1999a; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991; Wolfet, 2006).

## Gender and Grieving

Studies have also examined the role that gender plays in death loss experiences. Gender is a social construct that is continuously created and recreated (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). However, most scholars who have studied grief have viewed gender on a binary (Stillion & Noviello, 2001). For instance, Martin and Doka (2000) indicated that in comparison to men, women tend to grieve more intensely and tend to express their feelings, whereas men tend to focus on thinking over feeling.

A study by Chen et al. (1999) observed men and women within the first two years of their death loss. Chen and colleagues (1999) revealed that women experienced higher depression and anxiety:

[W]omen identify and express more immediately their feelings of emotional distress, whereas men may not be as aware of or sensitive to their feelings about the loss, and if they are, for many it may be several years (beyond the 25 month observation period of our study) before they are in touch with these thoughts and feelings. (p. 378)

This finding was similar to a study by Lawrence et al. (2006), who looked at male and female college students who lost a parent to death. They found that when they observed males and females separately, “a relationship was found between avoidant coping style and depressive and grief symptoms in females only. No such relationship was found among the male students” (Lawrence et al., 2006, p. 331). Another study that focused on college-aged women suggested that women who experienced parental death losses were at risk of disordered eating-related symptoms (Beam et al., 2004).

These studies provide some insight into how sex and gender may appear in the way that people grieve. However, Rosenblatt (2013) cautions that: “it would be a mistake to take the

gender patterns in any specific culture and assume they are universal, or even to assume that they are necessarily always followed in the culture in which one notes the patterns” (p. 122). In summary, there is not a one-size-fits-all formula when it comes to how people respond to death and how they will grieve and mourn.

### **Being Culturally Competent in Death-Related Matters**

Being culturally competent is an important skill to have when engaging with bereaved individuals to respect their practices and to offer support. Individuals have so many different layers to their identities, and even members within the same family structure may experience significant differences in responding to a death loss and how to grieve. That is why Bharathy et al. (2013) caution that one should always be open and flexible when working with the bereaved.

### **Theories about Grief and Mourning**

The scholarship on grief and mourning continues to evolve as people critique earlier models, and expand upon other studies. To better understand how people respond to a death loss, this section provides an overview of various grief theories. Early paradigms of grief will be introduced first, followed by more recent postmodern models.

#### **Early Paradigms of Grief**

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud (1957) suggested that bereaved individuals should sever their feelings and attachments to the deceased. Freud believed that bereaved individuals could resolve their grief by applying their energy towards new relationships rather than concentrating on the dead. Introducing the term *Trauerarbeit* or grief work, Freud explained that bereaved individuals needed to grieve to prevent themselves from experiencing melancholia. However, Freud’s theory has received criticism because “while many may benefit

from emotional catharsis for dealing with grief it is not necessarily a useful strategy for everyone” (Doughty & Hoskins, 2011, p. 26).

Kubler-Ross (1969) created a model that explained anticipatory grief based on her work with terminally ill patients. Kubler-Ross presented this model in her book, *On Death and Dying*, that outlined five stages of grief: (1) shock and denial; (2) anger, resentment and guilt; (3) bargaining; (4) depression; and (5) acceptance. Although this model is widely known, there has been limited empirical data to support this finding (Doka, 1996).

John Bowlby was a scholar who used his previous work on attachment theory to understand death loss further. Although Bowlby’s earlier scholarship focused on attachment theory and children, he later began to apply theories of attachment to bereavement. Bowlby (1980) created the four phases of mourning, including (1) numbing; (2) yearning and searching for the lost figure; (3) despair and disorganization; and (4) reorganization. Although Bowlby acknowledged that individuals could oscillate between the phases he created, his work has received criticism for not being a “complete or fully accurate description of how . . . patients mourn” (Baker, 2001, p. 56).

Worden (1991) later identified four tasks of grieving for bereaved individuals to complete their mourning. These tasks are (1) to accept the reality of the loss; (2) to work through the emotions associated with the loss; (3) to learn how to cope with practical tasks of living without the support of the deceased; and (4) to find a new place in one’s emotional life for one’s relationship with the person who died. Similar to the other theories, bereaved individuals needed to work through different phases or tasks to resume a sense of normalcy in their life.

These early contributions about grief and mourning have helped pave the way for scholars and everyday people to discuss how death continues to impact the living. As noted,

individuals have challenged these theories for a variety of reasons. Stroebe and Schut (1999) summarized the criticisms about these early works:

There are shortcomings in traditional theorizing about effective ways of coping with bereavement, most notably, with respect to the so-called ‘grief work’ hypothesis.

Criticisms include imprecise definition, failure to represent dynamic processing that is characteristic of grieving, lack of empirical evidence and validation across cultures and historical periods, and a limited focus on intrapersonal processes and on health outcomes. (p. 197)

Early paradigms of grief have limitations (Baker, 2001; Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Doka, 1996; Doughty & Hoskins, 2011; Stroebe, 1992; Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Wortman & Silver, 1989). Therefore, new paradigms have been established that cast doubt on detachment theories and suggest that continuing bonds with the deceased may be beneficial for the bereaved as it enriches “functioning in the present” (Walter, 2003, p. 5).

### **New Paradigms of Grief and Mourning**

As more scholars study grief and mourning, different theories are beginning to emerge. Rather than severing ties with the deceased, Walter (2003) explained that a postmodern paradigm of grief allows individuals to begin a new life while simultaneously continuing the relationship that they had with the deceased. When speaking about the loss of a life partner, Walter (2003) mentioned that “the ‘continuing bonds’ with the deceased can enrich the new life of the bereaved partner” (p. 6). Below are the theories that incorporate this different perspective on grief.

Klass et al. (1996) wrote a book called *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. In this publication, the authors questioned previous paradigms of grief for suggesting that bereaved individuals should detach themselves from the deceased to move on. Instead, these

scholars believe that bereaved individuals should create a new relationship with the dead because these continued bonds may be a healthy form of grieving.

Next, Neimeyer's (1998) book *Lessons of Loss: A Guide to Coping*, mentioned that there is no predictable journey of grief that one goes through since grief is such a personal experience. Neimeyer (1998) believed that "meaning reconstruction in response to a loss is the central process in grieving" (p. 110). In other words, "the grief process is seen as an active revision of the life narrative to once again find meaning, or find new meanings in the fact of a changed reality" (Balk, 1999b, p. 468). Through this meaning reconstruction, Neimeyer (1998) viewed grieving a death loss as a social process, rather than an isolating experience, which allows the bereaved to keep their ties to the deceased open.

The year after *Lessons of Loss: A Guide to Coping* was published, Stroebe and Schut (1999) introduced the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement to describe how people come to terms with a significant death loss. These scholars identified two types of coping processes: loss-oriented stressors and restoration-oriented stressors. Loss-oriented stressors refer to remembering the person who has died so that they can process their relationship to the deceased. Restoration-oriented stressors involve the additional stressors that come with the death loss, such as further life changes that one must take on that used to be the responsibility of the deceased. According to Stroebe and Schut (1999), healthy grieving involves oscillating between these two types of coping processes.

In 2006, Wolfelt described six "yield signs" that bereaved individuals are likely to encounter on their journey with grief. He referred to this as the reconciliation needs of mourning, which includes (1) acknowledging the reality of the death; (2) embracing the pain of the loss; (3) remembering the person who died; (4) developing a new self-identity; (5) searching for meaning;



and (6) receiving ongoing support from others. Again, these yield signs are a departure from the older paradigms on grief because it involves a continued relationship with the deceased.

Scholars who wrote about new paradigms of grief helped to shape the foundation for others to think differently about grief. Instead of cutting ties with the deceased to resume a sense of normalcy, these scholars suggested that having continued bonds with the dead may be beneficial for the bereaved following a death loss.

### **Factors that Shape the Bereaved College Student Experience**

As the United States becomes more ethnically diverse, institutions of higher education are also experiencing a similar shift in student demographics (Bowman, 2013). Therefore as we become more aware of bereaved students on college and university campuses, factors such as one's cultural beliefs, practices, and personal identities should be at the forefront of how we care for students (Bonanno, 2004; Floerchinger, 1991; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). These cultural layers may inform how students grieve and mourn the death loss their loved ones.

A death loss can be a very traumatic experience. It may also be a very stressful situation for college students who feel pressured to perform well academically and to make progress towards their career goals (Balk et al., 1998; Battle et al., 2013; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Thus, when compounded with a death loss, the college student experience can be a very stressful time.

The 2007 mass shooting at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) resulted in 32 individuals losing their lives. Since 2019, 122 people have lost their lives during campus shootings (Rock, 2019). Although these highly publicized deaths have attracted media attention, it is more likely that college students are regularly experiencing grief when significant individuals in their lives die.

Balk (2008) wrote that within the first twelve months of their education, between 22% to 30% percent of undergraduate college students grieve the death loss of a family member or friend. A more recent study by Cox et al. (2015) found that the number of grieving students in college may be higher than previously reported. After conducting a longitudinal study on the prolonged grief among college students, Cox and colleagues (2015) found that nearly 60% of college seniors experienced at least one death loss in college, with one in four students reporting multiple death losses.

Although most studies on bereaved college students have focused on full-time undergraduate students, there are a few scholars who have also examined the graduate student experience. Varga (2015) stated that graduate students have similar death loss experiences as undergraduate students in that they lean on similar support systems and feel comparable effects. However, Varga also found that “graduate students with previous mental health diagnoses may be at a higher risk for developing prolonged grief disorder” (p. 183). In contrast, Nienaber and Goedereis (2015) asserted that graduate students generally reported lower levels of death anxiety than undergraduate students. Below are some factors that may shape how undergraduate and graduate students respond to death losses.

### **Developmental Status**

Traditional undergraduate students and graduate students may differ when it comes to coping with a death loss based on life circumstances and their developmental status (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Balk and Vesta (1998) recognized that traditionally aged college undergraduates (18-22 years old) are facing various developmental transitions. Therefore, “adolescent bereavement cannot be understood or investigated unless placed in an overall context of developmental tasks and transitions facing adolescents” (Balk & Corr, 2001, p. 199).

## **Identity Formation**

Identity formation is a natural process that happens within higher education, especially for traditionally aged college students. “When developmental life crises are accompanied by severe life events such as the death of a friend, one would anticipate obstructions in development should coping resources be inadequate to promote adaptation” (Balk et al., 1993, p. 430). However, Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) stated that “little research is currently available that offers insight into how the process of identity development may influence or be influenced by the process of bereavement for this population” (p. 963).

Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) noted that millennial students have been identified as a sheltered generation and perhaps less well-equipped to cope with a death loss. However, there are college students who have a more difficult time with their death loss experience than others. College students who are grieving “may experience considerable difficulty recovering from grief and thereby endanger the prospects of gaining the maturity needed to lead lives filled with a sense of autonomy, direction, and intimacy” (Balk, 2001, p. 69). Long term effects of grief can also “jeopardize their adult contributions as parents, lovers, friends, and contributors in the world of work” (Balk, 2001, p. 75).

## **Relationship to the Deceased**

Scholars have also studied the relationship that the bereaved student had with the individual who died. A qualitative study by Blinn-Pike and McCasin (2018) looked at journal entries of college granddaughters who wrote about their deceased grandfathers. By looking at the developmental stage of the student and their age when their grandfathers died, they noticed that: “the way a child understands death, and experiences grief and coping, is related to his or her developmental capacity” (Blinn-Pike & McCaslin, 2018, p. 324).

Students who had lost a parent or caregiver, found their death loss to be complicated. In addition to the physical distance from family members, many college students try to create some emotional distance from their caretakers during this time (Battle et al., 2013). Therefore, if a parent or caregiver dies, students may develop a sense of guilt from trying to emotionally distance themselves while they were seeking independence and autonomy (Janowiak et al., 1995).

### **College Major**

Bakan and Arli (2018) conducted a study on 197 university students in the Eastern part of Turkey. Their study found that “students who received nursing education and who received religious education had similar attitudes toward death” (Bakan & Arli, 2018, p. 2389). Additionally, a study by Sharma et al. (1997) found that nursing students had less apprehension with death and being with the dead than their undergraduate peers who had a different academic major.

### **Disclosing a Death Loss in Higher Education**

Strange and Banning (2001) explored how the campus environment contributes to a college student’s experience. They found that not only does the structure and layout of a campus shape a student’s experience, but so do the individuals who belong to that environment. Scholars have suggested that institutions of higher education are more than just scholarly communities. They are communities who should provide care and compassion to support bereaved students (Balk, 2001; Wesener et al., 2010). However, colleges and universities have gained a reputation for being “an isolating and lonely place for grieving undergraduate students” (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006, p. 226). This may be because college and university campuses are not typically a place where grief is shared widely (Balk et al., 1998). Balk (2001) stated that “bereaved

students find few if any persons in the university willing to mention the death, to acknowledge the importance of this event in the student's life, or to recognize the significance for the griever of the person who died" (p. 75). How do bereaved college students navigate such an uncertain terrain? The following section presents an overview of the various avenues that bereaved students may use to disclose their death loss experience to others.

### **Mental Health Services**

LaGrand (1985) referred to bereaved college students as the "forgotten grievers." As mentioned earlier, college students are an understudied population of grievers (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Sklar & Hartley, 1990) because they need to disclose this information to be identified. Even when college students are dealing with a death loss, they do not always associate their grief with mental health (Balk, 2001). For example, those who use mental health services may present their grief as another issue: "they are likely to complain instead of resulting symptomatology including inability to concentrate and study, loss of motivation, and insomnia" (Hardison et al., 2005, p. 100). Bereaved students who end up seeking help from mental health services are typically the "exception rather than the rule" (Balk, 2008, p. 8).

Since death losses may be all-consuming for some individuals, scholars and practitioners have urged colleges and universities to provide bereaved college students with resources from their institution's counseling and psychological support centers (Balk, 2001). However, there have been contradictory findings on whether or not college students are comfortable with using mental health resources. Although some students may benefit from grief support groups, there may be others who feel stigmatized by participating (Vickio, 2008). For instance, some studies have found that grief counseling has been "remarkably ineffective" (Bonanno, 2004, p. 21).

Balk (2011) suggested that some college students are still hesitant about using counseling and psychological services due to the continued stigma that is attached to mental health services. For example, certain groups of individuals tend to use mental health services less than others. College men rarely use counseling services. Balk (2011) surmises that this is because “seeking help is shameful for [men], something in conflict with a mainstream view of masculinity emphasizing autonomy and control” (p. 25).

Studies have also revealed information about ethnic and cultural groups and their perspectives on mental health services. Asian American students tend not to seek counseling services because it may cause shame for both the individual as well as the family (Balk, 2011). Balk (2011) also found that African American students tend not to use mental health services as much as their Caucasian peers. However, Neimeyer et al. (2006) found that African Americans suffered greater separation and traumatic distress than Caucasians after a death loss. The obstacles that prevent African American students from attending mental health services include “a mistrust of White counselors, as well as cultural attitudes toward mental health concerns” (Balk, 2011, p. 26).

### **Peer Response**

There remains conflicting information about whether or not bereaved college students have peers on their campuses who they can confide in after a death loss. Vickio et al. (1990) suggested that college students can respond appropriately to their grieving peers. On the contrary, Balk (2001), said that “few bereaved students find peers willing to listen or be present when stories of grief surface” (p. 76). Balk’s findings indicated that not all individuals have the skills that are necessary to talk with someone who has experienced a death loss. Bereaved college students may also “lack the skills to communicate their situation and their needs

effectively to others and also may lack a social network of friends who could serve as sources of support” (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010, p. 953).

College campuses can be a challenging environment for bereaved students. Institutions that have a campus party-culture may cause some bereaved students to feel disconnected from their peers (Battle et al., 2013). Some college students may feel uncomfortable talking about death and may not be able to console their grieving peers (Floerchinger, 1991). Peers may also do more harm than good when interacting with their bereaved peers by unintentionally dismissing the significance or duration of a student’s grief (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Battle et al., 2013). Therefore, even well-meaning friends may unintentionally suggest for the mourner to deny their reactions and “to ‘keep a stiff upper lip,’ or to be strong for the sake of others” (Floerchinger, 1991, p. 149).

Despite conflicting information on whether or not students feel comfortable talking with their bereaved peers, multiple studies have highlighted the importance of peer support. Tedrick Parikh and Servaty-Seib (2013) noted that “When peer support breaks down, institutional integration and commitment to the university can break down as well” (p. 656). However, when students listened to their grieving peers, bereaved individuals felt that they were able to express their feelings about the loss (Tedrick Parikh & Servaty-Seib, 2013). Consequently, scholars and practitioners have urged their institutions to train their staff, especially resident advisors and academic advisors, on how to appropriately respond to bereaved individuals (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

In terms of training and awareness, Balk (2001) suggested that colleges and universities train non-bereaved students to provide peer support. “Training programs built around the fundamental concepts of empathy, attentive listening, and awareness of the phenomena of grief

would enable students to help their peers” (Balk, 2001, p. 76). Additionally, this type of training would provide invaluable skills that students could take with them wherever they may go.

### **Faculty Response**

In addition to seeking support from mental health services or confiding in their peers, bereaved students may still feel overwhelmed with their academics. Although some students may not disclose their death loss experience with their faculty members (Battle et al., 2013), other students may speak up and ask for academic accommodations from their faculty. Academic accommodations could include taking time off from coursework, receiving extensions on deadlines, having opportunities to make up exams, or being allowed to take an incomplete (Balk, 2001; Battle et al., 2013; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Taub & Severaty-Seib, 2008). However, asking for these types of accommodations may be complicated due to “pressures to complete coursework on schedule, and concerns about additional costs of extending one’s time in achieving a degree” (Battle et al., 2013).

### **Obstacles for Bereaved College Students**

Higher education has been identified as a challenging environment for bereaved college students (Battle et al., 2013). Although some bereaved students may channel their energy towards their academics (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), a death loss can also significantly disrupt all aspects of a student’s life (Hardison et al., 2015; Vickio, 2008). Studies have revealed that bereaved college students may be at risk of performing poorly in their academic coursework and of dropping out of school (Balk, 2001; Balk et al., 1993; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). The obstacles that bereaved students may face include academic challenges, physical and emotional trials, and difficulties with distance.



## **Academic Challenges**

According to Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006), bereaved college students earn significantly lower GPAs than peers who were similar to them based on factors such as “sex, age, race, entering SAT score, semester of study...and school of study” (p. 228). Scholars have explained that concentration issues, time management, and failure to meet their deadlines all contribute to the decline in a bereaved student’s academic performance (Balk et al., 1993; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Floerchinger, 1991). Similarly, Balk (2001) stated that “difficulties with grief produce severe problems in concentrating, studying, completing assignments, passing courses, staying in school, and taking advantage of the multiple opportunities offered in a university’s diverse social milieu” (p. 81).

As mentioned earlier, some students take advantage of academic accommodations from their faculty. However, there may be some students who need to temporarily withdraw from their institution for reasons related to their bereavement. “Yet these students are often so overwhelmed by their loss that they simply walk away from their classes, leaving a record of failing grades to contend with upon return” (Balk, 2008, p. 12).

## **Physical and Emotional Challenges**

According to Bonanno and Kaltman (2001), the stress that results from a death loss may result in increased visits to the doctor’s office. Some physical reactions that have been experienced by bereaved individuals include “chills, diarrhea, fatigue, and profuse sweating” (Balk, 1999a, p. 486). Additionally, bereaved individuals have expressed a range of emotions such as feeling anxious, confused, depressed, fear, anger, and sorrow (Balk, 1999a; Bonnano, 2005). Consequently, bereaved college students may experience feelings of isolation, which

“may drive the bereaved individuals to withdraw from others or pretend normalcy in order to be accepted by peers” (Balk et al., 1993, p. 441).

Studies by scholars have indicated that bereaved individuals may experience insomnia (Balk, 2008; Bonanno, 2005). Hardison, Neimeyer, and Lichstein (2005) conducted a study on 508 undergraduate bereaved college students and 307 undergraduate non-bereaved participants. They found that the frequency of insomnia was higher among bereaved students, with 59% reporting insomnia after the death of their family member or friend. This lack of sleep may interfere with their studies and present additional stressors for students who are trying to resume their status as a productive student (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). In addition to sleep disturbances, bereaved individuals may experience a change in their behavior following a death loss, including “excessive drinking, increased cigarette smoking, and reckless risk taking” (Balk, 1999a, p. 486).

### **Challenges with Distance**

Another obstacle that bereaved college students may face when returning to the college campus includes experiencing difficulties of being away from home (Floerchinger, 1991). For students attending college away from their family or hometown, the geographical separation from their familial support systems may prove to be challenging after a death loss (Schnider et al., 2007). Battle et al. (2013) noted that “A bereaved student’s loneliness and isolation may be amplified by physical distance from family and friends, as well as by being surrounded by young people who themselves have had little experience with death and dying” (p. 364).

First-generation college students, as well as students from collectivist cultures who experience a death loss, often feel the urge to return home to be near their families (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010). Similarly, students who attend higher education further from their family may

have difficulties since their support system may not be readily available (Schnider et al., 2007). These events may cause “students to re-evaluate their commitments and may lead to decreased educational performance, academic probation, academic dismissal, or voluntary withdrawal” (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006, p. 226). However, receiving support after a death loss can be complicated for college students when their usual support systems exist but are not easily accessible (Balk et al., 1998).

### **What Bereaved College Students Need**

Various strategies can support individuals who have experienced loss and grief. Balk (1997) found that there were certain practices that bereaved individuals engaged in that helped them with their death loss experience. These practices included “remembering good things about the deceased, engaging in religious practices, crying, keeping busy, talking about the death, and thinking the person is better off because he/she is dead” (Balk, 1997, p. 215). Additionally, Osterweis and Townsend (1988) mentioned that:

Considerable evidence shows that the support of friends and relatives, having people to open-up to, and being supported by religious beliefs and rituals have a positive effect on the general health status and may serve to protect the survivor’s mental health and physical health. (p. 11)

This network of support systems that surround the dying person and their family are often known as compassionate communities, and they provide both emotional and social support (Ross, 2018). Osterweis and Townsend (1988) speculated that although bereaved individuals typically receive support immediately following the death loss, this support tends to decline over time when it may be needed most.

### **Conceptual Framework: Educational Resilience**

According to Anghel (2015), resilience has received more attention over the past few decades because research has switched from “assessing and explaining negative psychological processes to identifying positive and adapting mechanisms” (p. 153). Resilience is often associated with positive adaptations that follow significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000). However, Balk (2007) stressed that resilience does not necessarily denote a positive outcome, but rather a return to baseline functioning. Additionally, scholars Southwick et al. (2014) noted that resilience exists on a continuum and that an individual who adapts well in one arena in their life may fail to adapt well in other areas.

Resilience has also been written about within a death loss context. Bonanno (2004) said that resilience is:

[T]he ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning. (p. 20)

Since the focus of this research is on the lived experiences of college students who academically persisted with a 2.0 GPA or higher after a significant death loss experience, a specific form of resilience, educational resilience, was chosen for this study’s conceptual framework. According to Wang et al. (1994), the definition of educational resilience is “the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences” (p. 46).

## **Personal Factors and Environmental Factors**

Personal factors and environmental factors can further explain educational resilience. Personal factors are the “internal attributes and attitudes that the individual uses to buffer the adverse effects of their situation. Willingness to work hard, healthy self-concept, educational aspirations, and motivation are among the personal factors believed to be associated with educational resilience” (Wayman, 2002, p. 168).

Environmental factors include the “external influences that provide support and protect against negative factors threatening the resilient person” (Wayman, 2002, p. 168). Multiple scholars have found that being surrounded by positive individuals such as family and friends may contribute to one’s educational resilience (Alva, 1991; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Clark, 1983; Horn & Chen, 1998; Wayman, 2002). In their research, Ungar (2013) found that individuals who experienced trauma tended to be resilient when they had access to social networks who helped them to use resources and engage in behaviors that were congruent with their culture.

Scholars have found that a mixture of personal and environmental factors contribute to a resilient outcome. Bonanno (2004) suggested that elements such as social support, intelligence, education, family background, and no previous psychiatric history may predict resilient functioning in individuals. Additionally, Bonanno et al. (2011) stated that “personality, demographic variation, level of trauma exposure, social and economic resources, a priori world views, and capacity for positive emotions” are resilience-promoting factors (p. 522).

## **Resilience versus Grit**

Although resilience and grit are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between these two terms. Grit is known as the passion and perseverance for long-term goals where one

works “strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087).

Although this description of grit may sound similar to resilience, the difference is:

Resilience is the optimism to continue when you’ve experienced some failures and times are so tough that others see continuing as futile or impossible...Grit is the motivational drive that keeps you on a difficult task over a sustained period of time. (Miller, 2020)

Educational resilience was chosen for this study because I wanted to focus on student’s optimism to continue their studies and understand how they were able to manage and adapt to stress and adversity following their death loss.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is Schlossberg’s (1981) theory of transition. According to Schlossberg (1981), a “transition can be said to occur if an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). This theory relies on self-perception, as individuals must view changes to be significant for it to be considered a transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1984). The type, context, and impact of the death loss experience are critical aspects of a bereaved student’s college experience.

### **Types of Transitions**

Schlossberg’s theory of transition was created to describe the “extraordinarily complex reality that accompanies and defines the capacity of human beings to cope with change in their lives” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 3). Although this theory has been revised over time to incorporate social and cultural changes, three types of transitions remain: (1) anticipated transitions, that refer to expected events that are likely to occur; (2) unanticipated transitions, that are unexpected

events that occur that are not predictable; and (3) nonevents, that occur when an individual anticipates an event that does not take place (Schlossberg, 1981).

### **Context of the Transition**

The relationship that one has to the event or nonevent is an essential factor in understanding transitions. The relationship can be personal, interpersonal, or involving the public or community (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1984). Additionally, the setting in which the transition occurs is also central to understanding the transition. Transitions may involve roles such as self, friends, family, work, health, or economics (Schlossberg, 1984). The context also encompasses “the larger socioeconomic and political arenas along with issues around cultural diversity” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 45).

### **Impact of the Transition**

The impact of the transition on an individual’s relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles is important to consider. However, Schlossberg (1981, 1984) stated that how the transition alters one’s daily life, is of most importance to the person that is undergoing a transition. Anderson and colleagues (2012) asserted that more coping resources may be required if a transition alters an individual’s life. Additionally, it may take longer to assimilate or adapt to the transition.

### **Coping Resources**

Everyone deals with transitions differently (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg, 1981). Therefore Schlossberg’s theory of transition has identified four areas that influence how a person will cope with a transition known as the “4 S’s:” situation, self, support, and strategies. The access to or lack of resources that individuals have within these four areas helps to explain “why

different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 57).

The first of the “4 S’s” stands for the situation. Individuals tend to examine factors about the situation, including if the transition happened “on time” or “off time” with respect to life events and if it happened during a “good” or “bad” time (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 73). The next “S” represents self, which includes: (1) personal and demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, sex role, age and stage of life, and state of health; and (2) psychological resources including ego development, personality, outlook, commitments and values (Schlossberg, 1984). The third “S” stands for support, also known as social support. According to Schlossberg (1984), people receive support from four primary sources, including “their intimate relationships, their family units, their network of friends, and the institutions or communities of which they are a part” (p. 99). The final “S” refers to strategies that one may employ, including (1) modifying the situation; (2) controlling the meaning; and (3) managing stress. The way that an individual copes with their transition depends on the resources that they have available in these four areas.

### **Schlossberg’s Transition Theory and Death Loss**

Schlossberg’s theory of transition was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because of its transferability to college students who have experienced a death loss. For example, Balk and colleagues (1993) explained that college students might experience a death loss in a few different ways:

Death events in the life of a college student can be anticipated and on-time (e.g., the death of a 90-year-old grandparent); unexpected and off-time (e.g., the accidental death of a peer); and anticipated but off-time (e.g. the death of a sibling due to cancer)...many



of these events (the deaths of close friends, parents or siblings serving as prime examples) are off-time, non-normative, and un-anticipated. (p. 431)

Although these scenarios provide a few examples of how a college student may experience a death loss, they also demonstrate how these events may be seen as a transition if the death loss is significant to the individual. Schlossberg (1981) wrote that “it is not the transition itself that is of primary importance, but rather how that transition fits with an individual’s stage, situation, and style at the time of the transition” (p. 5). This model is appropriate and relevant to this study because the focus of this research is not on the death loss that occurred. Rather, it is how the death loss shaped the participant’s college experience and how they used the 4 S’s to cope with the transition. The situation, self, support, and strategies that participants used are all of interest to illustrate how participants academically persisted after their death loss experience.

### **Summary**

College student bereavement is prevalent on college campuses, although it may not be readily visible to the naked eye. Students who experience a death loss typically have to disclose this information to their peers, staff members, and faculty for this information to be known. Although some individuals may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with talking to bereaved college students about their death loss, it is clear that colleges and universities could benefit from training their students and employees on how to support bereaved college students.

Experiencing a death loss is a very personal and unique experience for individuals. Multiple factors, such as one’s values, beliefs, practices, and experiences, may shape how individuals respond to the death loss of someone significant. Although some bereaved college students notice cognitive difficulties and a decline in their academic performance following a

death loss, other students have more positive reactions and show their resilience by academically persisting.

As theories about grief and mourning continue to be tested and challenged, more scholars are beginning to research college student bereavement and offer new perspectives on how to have continued bonds with the deceased. This study is an effort to provide a more resilient-based perspective on the bereaved college student experience, by using educational resilience as the conceptual model to highlight the narratives of bereaved college students who have academically persisted in the face of adversity. Schlossberg's theory of transition was selected as the theoretical framework to show how significant events, such as a death loss, shape a college student's experience. The 4 S's provide a framework to discuss how specific resources in the lives of bereaved students impact how they cope with their transition. In Chapter III, I describe the methods I used to carry out this study.

### CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present my study's research design by first explaining the philosophical framework that I operate from as a scholar. I then describe the reasons why I chose a qualitative research design and provided my rationale for using narrative inquiry to guide this research. Additionally, I address ethical issues, the trustworthiness of this study, and how my experiences and identities contribute to this research.

#### **Philosophical Framework**

Luttrell (2010) stated that researchers become the instrument of their studies by being a part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon that they are trying to understand. With respect to narrative inquiry, McNiff (2007) mentioned that stories do not just appear. Rather, stories are written by researchers that incorporate their values into the writing process. Based on this position, it is my responsibility as a scholar to share the philosophical framework that I worked from when conducting this study. It is also important to disclose the experiences, assumptions, and beliefs that I subscribe to that shape this research and inform the findings from this study.

#### **Constructivist Paradigm**

As a scholar, I align with the constructivist paradigm. According to Jones et al. (2014), individuals who align with this paradigm construct meaning and knowledge about the world through their experiences. As mentioned earlier, scholars have acknowledged that bereaved college students are an understudied group (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Sklar & Hartley, 1990). By operating from a constructivist paradigm, I used this study to provide a platform for bereaved college students to share their voices and experiences and worked with them to share their

narratives through this manuscript. This paradigm aligned well with narrative inquiry because of its focus on deeply understanding situations from a particular context (Patton, 2002).

### **Ontology**

Ontology refers to the nature of reality (Creswell, 2013). As a scholar who aligns with the constructivist paradigm, I believe that “knowledge and existence are perceived and constructed through human interaction” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 14). I knew that as I started this study that my position as a researcher and my dual role as an administrator at one particular research site could influence my interaction with participants. Participants often asked how I came up with this research topic. I shared with them that I had a personal tie to this research topic since I had experienced multiple death losses throughout my studies. I believe that being vulnerable and transparent about my own story and sharing my inspiration for conducting this research allowed me to create an environment in which participants were more open and willing to share their experiences with me.

With participants living in different states and cities than me, I interacted with them by making myself available to them through different modes of communication, including in-person interaction when possible, phone calls, and email exchanges. I shared my contact information participants to keep the lines of communication open through the different stages of this research.

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology is a term that refers to one’s belief about knowledge and how these claims are justified (Creswell, 2013). In this study, I viewed my participants as the experts of their stories. I did not try to convince participants to answer questions in any particular way and did not make any effort to alter their truth to fit the needs of this study. I valued what each

participant brought to the table and encouraged their voices and participation throughout the study. Therefore participants had the opportunity to share their narratives through multiple formats, including two semi-structured interviews and a journaling activity, which I describe in more detail later in this chapter. Through this process, I worked with participants to mutually construct meaning and knowledge. Whether it was through in-person meetings, email communication, or phone calls, I worked with participants to identify and verify their experiences to mutually construct meaning in this study. It was through this collaborative effort that this manuscript was built, sharing the storied lives of bereaved college students who have academically persisted in the face of this type of adversity.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Qualitative research is often used to “illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the lives of human beings and the world in which we live” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 11). Since I was researching a relatively understudied student group, qualitative research allowed me to provide rich descriptions from participants who identified as bereaved college students. I chose a qualitative research design since my study was situated within a real context and “has a strong impact on the reader” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11).

Daniel and Harland (2017) have noted that “qualitative research is exploratory in nature and concerned with the examination of narratives and people’s interaction within a particular social context” (p. 111). With nearly 60% of college students experiencing a death loss of someone they care about during their postsecondary journey (Cox et al., 2015), this study provided a space for bereaved college students to tell their narratives. This study had participants share their death loss experiences during college while bringing to light successes of how they were able to persist in the face of this type of adversity.

Narrative inquiry was used to explore and understand the lived experiences of bereaved college students who encountered a death loss during their studies. According to Pinnegar and Daynes (2007), “the acceptance of the relational and interactive nature of human science research, the use of the story, and a focus on a careful accounting of the particular are hallmarks of knowing in narrative inquiry” (p. 25). Narrative inquiry aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals, such as laypeople and individuals who have been on the margins of society, and how they assign meaning to events by focusing on participant’s first-hand stories (Jones et al., 2014; Kim, 2016; Moen, 2006). This process helps to “illuminate the hidden, the unseen, and the neglected details of meaning” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. ix), which pairs well with the participants in this study since bereaved college students are a hidden population in higher education.

A defining aspect of narrative inquiry involves the researcher re-telling the narratives of their participants. Narrative inquiry explores “the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted- but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42). Therefore, researchers become a part of the research process through a “shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Consequently, there is a large amount of responsibility that the researcher holds, and researchers should establish trust with their participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jones et al., 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As previously mentioned, I established trust with my participants by being open and forthcoming about my study and my connection to this subject matter. I shared with participants that I had experienced multiple death losses during my educational journey and that I went through my own trials and tribulations. I believe that my

transparency with my connection to this study allowed me to relate to my participants and develop a genuine, trusting relationship with them. This openness was crucial considering the personal and sensitive topics related to this study.

Lastly, I did not seek to provide generalizable findings through large sample sizes. On the contrary, the focus of this study was to help illuminate “layered meanings people assign to aspects of their lives” (Josselson, 2011, p. 240). Therefore for this study, I sought out information-rich cases rather than belaboring on the study’s sample size (Morrow, 2005).

### **Methods**

In this section of the manuscript, I share the techniques that I engaged in to conduct this research. I begin by discussing the pilot study that prepared me for this study. Next, I provide my rationale for selecting the three research sites that were used for this research and then discuss how I proceeded with recruiting and selecting participants from these institutions. I then outline the data collection methods that I implemented and describe how I analyzed the data.

#### **Pilot Study**

In preparation for this research, I had conducted a pilot study with a doctoral student who had experienced a significant death loss while enrolled in their program. The pilot study helped affirm the questions that I had developed in my interview protocol. Although the pilot study did not result in any changes to the interview questions, the experience better prepared me as an interviewer. For instance, the pilot study provided me with some insight into the reactions that I could anticipate from my research participants and the type of emotional labor that I would experience throughout this process as the interviewer.

When I finally engaged in my research study, I made sure that I blocked off my schedule both before and after the interview so that I could prepare myself and later process the

information I received. I also did my best to arrive early to the interview location so that I could get myself ready to meet my participants. Coming 10-15 minutes ahead of time allowed me to place the tissue box and consent forms where the participants would be sitting, and have enough quiet time before the participants arrived to have a calm presence to conduct the interview. After meeting with participants, I made sure to process the information that participants shared with me by jotting down notes and reflections.

### **Site Selection**

In this study, I used three research sites. These institutions of higher education were all located within the United States: (1) a private, West regional institution; (2) a public, West regional institution; and (3) a public, Midwest regional institution. Information about each institution and the rationale for why I selected them are provided below.

The private, West regional institution was a small baccalaureate college with an arts and sciences focus, located in an urban setting. As an exclusively undergraduate, four-year institution that was highly residential, 99.1% of the student body was enrolled as full-time students. As a full-time, live-in administrator on this campus, I believed that this was a great site selection because there was an active, student-administered grief group on campus. Additionally, I would have access to several resources that would assist me in the data collection phase, such as rooms to conduct interviews and colleagues to help me to recruit participants. Multiple students expressed their interest in engaging in this research but were not selected because they did not meet the minimum requirements to be eligible for this study. Therefore, this study expanded to include two additional research sites after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board from each campus.



The second site that I selected is a large public, West regional institution. In the Carnegie Classification of Institutions, this institution is considered to be a very high research, doctoral university located in an urban setting. This institution is highly residential, with 96.5% of students enrolled full-time. This institution was selected because it publicized several on and off-campus resources for bereaved individuals on their website. Additionally, I knew a few colleagues at this institution who were able to serve as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers helped me to identify participants and assisted me with reserving spaces on campus when I met with participants during my data collection phase.

The third site used in this study was a large public institution in the Midwest, located in a rural setting. Classified as a high research, doctoral university based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions, this student body was primarily residential, with 82.6% of students enrolled as full-time. This research site was chosen because I was familiar with the campus and the resources that are available to students. I also had gatekeepers at this institution who helped me to post flyers about this study across campus. One particular gatekeeper also helped me to reserve rooms when I engaged in the data collection phase of my research.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The recruitment and selection of participants varied slightly by each institution due to the requirements of their review boards. The public, West regional institution, and public, Midwest regional institution followed very similar protocols. However, there were some significant differences with the private, West regional institution.

### ***Eligibility Requirements***

To find participants who would provide excellent data (Morse, 2007), I established specific requirements that individuals needed to meet to be eligible for this study: (1) Individuals

must be at least 18 years old to participate; (2) Each individual must have experienced a death loss that was significant to them while they were enrolled; (3) Individuals must have experienced their death loss at least two years prior to the start of the study; and (4) Individuals must have maintained a 2.0 or higher term and cumulative GPA since the death loss.

The 2.0 or higher GPA requirement applied to all participants, even though the graduate students who participated in this study needed a 3.0 or higher GPA to be considered in good academic standing with their institution. My rationale for this decision was that I wanted to look beyond participants' GPAs so that I could hear the narratives of bereaved students who were making adequate progress towards their degree requirements and who had an overall GPA that made them eligible to earn a degree from their institution, which all graduate student participants had met.

The public, West regional institution as well as public, Midwest regional institution used these four eligibility requirements. However, in addition to these requirements, the Institutional Review Board at the private, West regional institution also required participants to meet two additional requirements to be eligible to participate. Due to the nature of the study, students needed to take the Beck Depression Inventory, which is a self-report that measures characteristic attitudes and symptoms of depression (Beck et al., 1961). They must have received a score between 1-10, which indicates that individuals fall within a reasonable range of depression. They then needed to fill out an interested subject questionnaire (see Appendix A) where they answered a one-page document to ensure that they met the requirements of this study.

### ***Gatekeepers***

Jones and colleagues (2014) explained that one strategy that researchers may employ to gain access to participants for a study is through gatekeepers, or "individuals who know

individuals and/or settings that meet the sampling criteria determined by the researcher” (p. 118). Multiple gatekeepers were used at the three research sites to assist me throughout my research process. However, this resulted in differing outcomes in terms of participant recruitment and selection, which I describe below.

At the private, West regional institution, there was a student-administered grief group on campus, which is where I thought I would recruit most of my participants. I reached out to the full-time campus administrator who oversaw this group and informed them of this study. As someone who had recently completed their doctoral program, this person was open to working with me to advertise my research. I was not allowed to attend the grief group meetings, but the administrator helped me to promote my research study on my behalf. Unfortunately, I was not able to recruit any participants from this particular group because they did not meet the eligibility requirements for this study. Although I was not able to recruit any students from this particular grief group, this gatekeeper helped me to see the significance of identifying a gatekeeper at all research sites.

Of all three research sites, I was least familiar with the public, West regional institution. Fortunately, I had three primary gatekeepers who assisted me at this research site. My first gatekeeper was a graduate student who was able to not only reach out to their peers about my study, but they also informed me about a campus listserv that I should use to publicize my research. They provided me with the listserv moderator’s contact information, which was crucial in helping me to recruit four out of the seven participants who I selected for this study. Additionally, I had two other helpful gatekeepers at this research site who helped me to secure rooms to interview my participants.

I also had two gatekeepers who assisted me at the public, Midwest regional institution. I was not physically present to post recruitment flyers for this study on campus since I was living on the west coast of the United States at the time. Therefore I had a gatekeeper who was familiar with the research site help me to print and post my research advertisement around campus. Additionally, I had another gatekeeper who helped me to secure rooms on campus so that I could interview participants.

### ***Marketing and Advertising***

I recruited participants for this study through both purposeful and referral sampling, with the hopes of finding individuals who “can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (Creswell, 2013, p. 147). At all three institutions, I used multiple forms of outreach. First, I made a unique flyer for each institution (see Appendix B). This flyer provided a summary of the research study. It also advertised the \$75.00 incentive for participants who were selected and my contact information. This flyer was distributed to each research site, electronically or in-person. It was also posted online through listservs and social media sites such as Facebook.

Word of mouth was another way to advertise this research study. By talking with students and groups of administrators about my study, more people began to learn about my research and would direct people my way. Once individuals contacted me to express their interest in this study, I corresponded with them through email. I sent them a participant recruitment message (see Appendix C), that explained the study in more detail, what requirements they needed to meet, and what participant involvement entailed. In this message, I notified students that their participation in this study was voluntary. Being allowed to withdraw from this study at any time

ensures that “the data collection sessions involve only those who are genuinely willing to take part and prepared to offer data freely” (Shenton, 2004, p. 66).

### ***Participant Selection***

When I was preparing for this research, my ideal number of participants for this study was between five to seven individuals. If more than seven individuals expressed their interest in this study, I was going to select participants based on maximum variation. However, I had difficulties recruiting people when this research began, and I had to expand my study to include two additional research sites. After increasing my research to the three institutions, more individuals started to express their interest in my research. Eventually, I was able to invite everyone to this study if they had met all of the eligibility requirements for this research and if they were available to meet with me during my data collection period. I invited individuals who were still interested in participating in this research to join the study. They confirmed with me their availability, and I responded to them with our meeting date, time, and location.

### **Data Collection**

Polkinghorne (1988) stated that interviews provide the basic source of evidence for narratives. In this study, data came from two semi-structured interviews, which took approximately four hours total. Additionally, I asked participants to complete a 15-minute journaling activity between their first and second interviews. These data collection methods allowed participants to share their narratives through both oral and written formats.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for there to be pre-determined questions with the flexibility to let our conversation naturally occur. The first interview (see Appendix D) always occurred face to face and lasted approximately two hours. This time was meant to introduce the

participants to the study and to establish rapport. It also provided space for participants to begin to share their narratives.

After completing the first interview, participants engaged in a 15-minute journaling activity (see Appendix E) to complete on their own before the second interview. The journaling activity provided participants with the flexibility to write anything that came to their minds about their death loss and how that shaped their college experience. I also included a few questions to the journaling activity that they could answer if they needed more guidance. These optional questions prompted participants to reflect on what questions or conversations they continued to think about since the first interview. According to Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002), journaling about stressful events can increase one's sense of well-being and produce benefits, including fostering personal growth after a challenging life experience (Pennebaker et al., 1997; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). I believe that this method may have been helpful for some participants to clarify what they were thinking and feeling by sharing their stories in written form. This reflection provided another venue where participants could fully express themselves (Wolfelt, 2006). I also employed this method of data collection to gain access to information that might not have typically occurred during the one-on-one, semi-structured interviews.

The second interview (see Appendix F) that participants engaged in was completed in person if possible, or by phone, and lasted approximately two hours. The second interview expanded upon questions that were asked in the first interview and became a space for clarification. It was also during the second interview that participants were reminded about the member checking process. I emailed participants sections of the manuscript, and together we mutually constructed knowledge by "living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).

Narratives that were gathered from the two semi-structured interviews were observed and electronically recorded. I also jotted down my notes and reflections after each meeting. Participants completed the journaling activity on a Word document. The interviews and journaling activity became the primary data in this research study.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2013) recommended that data analysis involves a process of “preparing and organizing the data for analysis, and then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (p.180). In preparation for analyzing the data for this study, I transcribed the electronically recorded interviews and immersed myself in the participants’ journals by reading them multiple times to familiarize myself with my participants’ stories.

Next, I engaged in a thematic narrative analysis to analyze the data from this research. Reissmann (2008) explained that “in thematic narrative analysis, emphasis is on ‘the told’- the events and cognitions to which language refers (the content of the speech)” (p. 58). Therefore the focus was on the content of the stories rather than the structure of the story. This form of analysis “honors people’s stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 115).

I used both inductive and deductive approaches to engage in narrative coding so that I could “represent the participants’ narratives from a literary perspective” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016, p. 138). According to Saldaña (2013), narrative coding is “appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions to understand the human condition through story, which is justified in and of itself as a legitimate way of knowing” (p. 132). Inductive coding took place by deriving codes from the semi-structured interviews and

journaling activity, specifically using *in vivo codes*, which are the words that are used by participants (Creswell, 2013). I used deductive coding when labeling items that consistently appeared in the literature review. I then performed data condensation, which is the process where I selected and simplified the data (Miles et al., 2014). I often categorized information from the data using a word or short phrase to encompass an idea (Jones et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013) and organized them into main findings with “relevant quotes from the data” (Daniel & Harland, 2017, p. 113).

Operating from a constructivist paradigm, I invited my participants to collaborate with me throughout this study. I emailed them their transcriptions and narrative codes, and worked with them on establishing the findings from the research. I then presented the findings in Chapter V through a composite narrative. I was inspired by Patton and Catching’s (2009) scholarship that highlighted the experiences of African American faculty by using composite narratives as a means of implementing counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is rooted in Critical Race Theory and presents the narratives of marginalized communities whose experiences are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Although my study did not center on race and racism and bereaved college students are not considered marginalized communities, I appreciated that the counter-storytelling method allows individuals who have been underrepresented to have their voices and experiences known. Bereaved students are not consciously considered in many policies and practices and the educational resilience of bereaved college is often overlooked in scholarly publications. Therefore, I decided to use the spirit of counter-storytelling to challenge the dominant narrative that focuses on the challenges that bereaved college students’ encounter, such as the decline in their academic performance following a death loss. Adapting Patton and Catching’s (2009) implementation of a composite narrative to tell people’s stories, I wrote a



script in which my seven research participants were transformed into four composite characters who discussed the major findings from this study at a Death Café.

### **Ethical Issues**

Clandinin (2007) mentioned that narrative inquiry is a profoundly relational form of inquiry, and therefore “ethics plays a central role throughout and beyond the research process” (p. xvi). To ensure that I accounted for ethical considerations in this study, I submitted all required documents and information about this study to the Institutional Review Boards at the three research sites. This process helped to protect the rights and welfare of the participants.

I also had all participants read and sign a participant consent form (see Appendix G) before their participation in this study. The participant consent form stated the purpose of the research and provided information about the procedures of the study. It also let individuals know that their participation in the research study was completely voluntary and that they were able to withdraw themselves from the study at any time, without penalty or explanation. Additionally, the participant consent form noted that the anticipated risks of participating in this research study were no greater than what they would typically experience in daily life.

I took multiple steps to protect participants’ identities and the information that they provided. According to Jones and colleagues (2014), confidentiality refers to how researchers handle the information that participants disclose to them. I stored the electronic recordings and transcriptions from the two semi-structured interviews as well as the participants’ journaling activity in my secure, personal residence. I also saved all the research materials on my password-protected computer.

I also invited participants to select pseudonyms for themselves, or I provided one for them. These pseudonyms were used throughout my notes and in the final manuscript to protect

participant's identities. Additionally, the names of the research sites were replaced with their descriptors to mask the identity of the institutions. Any distinctive programs, positions, events, or other personal identifiers that emerged from the participants' narratives were either altered or excluded from the final manuscript.

I also made it a point to walk in my participant's footsteps by answering the research interview questions and completing the journaling activity before conducting this study. Engaging in this activity allowed me to be in tune with the emotions that could appear with my participants. Additionally, engaging in these activities allowed me to document and be mindful of my own experiences so that I would not conflate my experience with those of my participants.

Lastly, I knew that I would be facing a lot of emotionally charged conversations due to the nature of the study. Working in residential life for over a decade helped provide me with a solid foundation for this study. As a college administrator, I have experienced several residents and staff members tell me about their death loss experiences. By having these first-hand experiences with working with students in distress and being trained on crisis response, I had the confidence to approach such a sensitive topic.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the confidence and quality of the research findings in a study (Jones et al., 2014; Loh, 2013; Shenton, 2004). One way to ensure that a study is academically sound is to describe the steps that were completed in this research. Therefore, I will be sharing the steps that I took to bolster the credibility of this study: member checks, prolonged engagement, and researcher reflexivity.

## **Member Checks**

Guba and Lincoln (1989) wrote that conducting member checks “is the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239). Member checking is a process that involves “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). This member checking process honored their narratives by capturing and representing their story with their collaboration and consent. According to Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), the act of honoring a participant’s story, while reporting honest information is called, fidelity (p. 27).

Operating from a constructivist paradigm, I checked in with my participants throughout multiple points in this study. After data collection, participants received transcripts from their two semi-structured interviews as well as a copy of their journaling activity. Participants had a week to review these documents so that they could verify if their “words match what they actually intended” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). Once I coded the transcripts and key findings began to emerge, I emailed the participants and gave them two weeks to “comment on categories or the interpretations made” (Thomas, 2006, p. 243). I then shared with all participants the findings, presented through a composite narrative, and encouraged them to contact me to discuss the manuscript and provide feedback. Six out of the seven participants responded to me and confirmed that they were able to see their experience reflected.

## **Prolonged Engagement**

This research study began in the spring of 2018. Over the years, I have been able to stay in contact with multiple participants after the data collection period concluded. According to Morse (2015), “spending more time on data collection in a particular setting provides time for trust to be established with participants. With increased trust (and intimacy), you will get better,

richer data” (p. 1214). There were participants who, after completing their interviews and electronic journaling activities, chose to stay in contact with me and provided me with updates about their lives. Many participants who completed their educational degrees shared that they either secured full-time jobs or sought out additional education. Other participants continued to make progress towards their degree, and there was one participant who shared with me further significant death losses that they continued to experience post-interview. The trust that I was able to build with participants allowed me to collect thick, rich descriptions of their experiences.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Although researchers may try to minimize their role in their study to stay objective, they continue to shape the study, whether they intend to or not (Wells, 2011). For example, personal histories and biases influence how researchers analyze their data and present their findings (Jones, 2002; Luttrell, 2010). Therefore research reflexivity is when researchers “self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs, and biases...that may shape their inquiry” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Since I was writing on such an emotionally charged topic that I connected with, I answered the same interview questions and completed the journaling activity that my participants used. It was important to do this, because as Freeman (2007) wrote, “there cannot be a full disentangling of ‘I’ and ‘me,’ of subject and object, the resultant story is bound to be permeated by one’s own irrevocably personal view” (p. 128). As I responded to the questions that I was going to be posing to my research participants, I noticed that I focused on three main areas: 1) my dissertation slump; 2) counseling; and 3) support from parents and friends. Answering these questions helped me to see how I reacted so that I could later compare and contrast this with what came up for my participants.

### **Researcher Interest and Positionality**

My interest in researching college student bereavement and academic persistence stems from my experience of dealing with multiple death losses throughout my professional and educational journey. Below, I share my connection with this research topic by disclosing the significant death losses that I have experienced. I then conclude this chapter by describing how my background, values, and experiences have contributed to this research study.

### **Personal Connection to Topic**

The first significant death loss that I experienced occurred when I lost my maternal grandfather during my fourth and final year as an undergraduate student at Eastern Washington University. As someone who was born and raised in Hawaii, I was relieved that I was able to spend my winter break back in Hawaii so that I could visit my grandfather while he was in the hospital. As winter break came to an end, I had to go back to Washington to resume my life as an undergraduate student. However, I vividly remember that one night when I was working at a late-night program on campus, my mother called me to tell me that my grandfather did not have much time left and that I should come back home.

Before I could even board the redeye flight back to Hawaii, I received a phone call at the airport from my mother telling me that my grandfather had passed away. I was in complete shock that he had died before I could make it back home, and I had felt so hopeless at that moment. As the plane started its course to Hawaii, I remember being grateful for the darkness of the airplane's cabin because it allowed me to cry and process the information I had just received. I had been very close to my grandfather, so his death had been very hard on me. I knew that my grandfather was not going to live forever and that his health was deteriorating, but I was not emotionally prepared for his passing. What made it especially difficult for me was that I did not

have a chance to say goodbye to my grandfather when he was alive and that I was not physically there with him in his final moments. I chose to keep my grandfather's death loss mostly to myself during my college experience. Still, I do remember informing my professors through email about my grandfather's passing since I was going to be absent from class.

Another death loss that I experienced during my college experience occurred the summer following the first year of my master's program at Seattle University. Seattle University was a small, tight-knit community where everyone knew one another on campus. That summer, our campus community experienced a heartbreaking death loss when we learned that one of our students, who I had directly supervised, died when they were studying abroad. The student's family brought her body back to the United States and held her closed casket funeral service in our campus chapel. Many of us who were around campus for the summer were able to attend. That was the first time that I had experienced the death loss of someone who had died at a relatively young age. As a first-year graduate student, I remember grieving the death loss of this student, while also trying to navigate my role as a first-time supervisor in supporting other members of our community who were also hurting from this loss. This particular death loss shaped my formative years as a student affairs practitioner. It provided me with my first glimpse into the secondary trauma that we as administrators experience throughout our career when tragedy and highly emotional events such as this occur.

The highest number of death losses that have occurred during my educational journey has taken place during my time as a doctoral student. After completing the second year of my doctoral studies at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, I lost my paternal grandmother and my four-year-old niece within one month of each other. In the following years, I also experienced the death loss of my maternal aunt as well as my French bulldog.

The geographic distance of living and studying in Ohio when my entire family was in Hawaii made the death losses of my grandmother and niece very difficult. My grandmother's passing occurred first. She had been an overall healthy woman, but one day she had felt sick, went to the hospital, and ended up passing away that same day. Although my grandmother was at an age where her death would not have been uncommon, her passing was shocking for our family because, as I mentioned, she was a generally healthy person. There were no signs that alerted our family that this was going to happen.

A month or so after my grandmother had died, my four-year-old niece ended up passing away very suddenly. Earlier that academic year, I had made plans to fly to South Africa for a summer internship. While I was still in Ohio preparing for my summer trip, I heard from my family in Hawaii that my niece had gotten sick and that she was at the hospital. No one knew what was medically going on with my niece, so she had to stay at the hospital for a few days, which concerned me. I remember telling my family that I wanted to come home to be with my niece, but my sister (my niece's mother) kept telling me not to worry about visiting her because I could see my niece when I returned home from my summer internship. However, my niece was diagnosed with Hemolytic-uremic System (HUS), and we learned that her kidneys were failing. Suddenly, things took a turn for the worse, and my niece got admitted to the intensive care unit. When this happened, I remember informing my faculty members and apologizing to my South Africa summer internship contacts and told them that I could not participate in the internship because I needed to go home to be with my niece. I remember purchasing my ticket to Hawaii and was about to fly there the following day. That night, I had made preparations to find hospital care items for my niece, thinking that if she was on dialysis that she would need a warm blanket and other things to keep her occupied during her stay in the hospital. However, I never had the

chance to give my niece those hospital gifts. The next morning before I could even fly out of Ohio, I received a phone call that my niece had passed away during surgery. My niece's sudden death, the fact that she was so young, and how I never got to say goodbye to her in person completely wrecked me.

I decided to leave my graduate assistantship in Ohio and moved back home to Hawaii. My priority shifted away from my doctoral studies, and I focused my energy on my family. I moved back into my parents' house, got a new job in Hawaii to help pay the bills, and focused all my remaining energy into my family. Before my niece's death loss, I was planning to graduate from my doctoral program in three or four years. However, I did not make any progress on my dissertation for years.

Similar to Stroebe and Schut's (1999) Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement, I was dealing with loss-oriented stressors of losing my niece and experiencing that grief, as well as restoration-oriented stressors of dealing with the life changes that occurred following my niece's death. My niece's death intensified my value for family and spending quality time spent with loved ones. However, upon moving back home to Hawaii, I learned very quickly that other family members did not share those same values. Therefore, in addition to losing my niece, I unexpectedly lost the relationship that I had with my sister, my niece's mother, who used to be a large part of my life growing up. Before this change in family dynamics, I used to have such a strong affinity for my biological family members. My niece's death made me shift my views on who I consider family and where I choose to invest my time.

When I was living in Hawaii with my parents, I also experienced the death loss of my maternal aunt. My aunt was in her 90s when she passed away. I was grateful that at that time, I lived a few minutes away from her assisted living care facility, which allowed me to spend some



quality time with her. However, my aunt's health started to decline drastically, and she began to have difficulties breathing. My aunt ended up passing away in the assisted living facility that she had lived in for years with her late husband. For most of my life, I had been afraid of death and dead bodies. However, my aunt's passing changed the way that I looked at death. When my parents and I went to pick out my aunt's outfit for her cremation, my aunt was still lying on her bed and looked so peaceful in comparison to the last memories I had of her where she was struggling to breathe. That final image of my aunt somehow dispelled the fear that I had about death and corpses, and I felt at ease being in her presence even though she was dead.

Although most of the death losses that I have shared involve human beings, one of the significant death losses that I have experienced was my French bulldog, Chloe, who I fondly called "Chlobear." I got Chlobear the first year of my doctoral program in 2013, and I lost Chlobear in 2016 due to lymphoma. It was tough to lose Chlobear not only because she died so young, which I often compared to my niece, but because she had such a profound impact on me during her short time on this earth.

There may be individuals who dismiss the death loss of a dog and consider it to be insignificant. However, my bond and connection with Chlobear was stronger than most relationships that I have had in my life. I helped to raise Chlobear from the time that she was only a few weeks old and she had been with me during some considerable transitions in my life. She was a constant source of support who provided me with such unconditional love, loyalty, and companionship during challenging times. She was there during my move to Ohio to start my doctoral program, she served as my emotional support animal, and she moved with me to Hawaii after my niece's passing. She later traveled with me to California after I accepted a new job, and even patiently waited with my mother as I defended my dissertation proposal. However,

Chlobear was diagnosed with lymphoma, which caused her a lot of suffering. Knowing that I was about to move to California for a new job, the veterinarian who I had seen in Hawaii suggested that I wait until I moved to the mainland to see an oncologist in California. However, a few days after moving to California, her health continued to decline steeply, and her quality of life was so poor that I made the incredibly hard decision to have her euthanized. It was one of the most challenging and painful choices that I have ever made, knowing that I was the person who decided to end her life. As someone who just moved into a new city to start a job, I honestly do not think that I could have emotionally had the strength to go through with her euthanasia if my mother had not been there with me by my side.

These death loss experiences, especially the death loss of my niece, have become such a significant part of my life story that I worked with my advisors to change my dissertation topic to focus on the bereaved college student experience. In a way, this topic change was the beginning stages of my healing process. Due to life circumstances and the nature of this study, it took me a few years to defend my dissertation proposal and even a few more years to get back to writing after I made a conscious effort to work on my dissertation again. However, writing and honoring people's bereavement narratives inspired me to finish this manuscript and bring some closure to this challenging yet formative time in my life journey. Although topics such as death and bereavement do not always conjure the most positive or inspirational feelings for most individuals, this research study has been helpful in my healing process.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In addition to sharing the death losses that I have experienced, it is important to disclose other aspects about myself to understand my influence on this study. I am a fourth-generation Japanese-American. As a young child, I grew up with messages that whatever you did and

wherever you went, you were always representing your family. As someone who was born in the 1980s, I believed that being identified as someone who used mental health services would reflect poorly on one's family. Although I have been educated on the benefits of mental health services and have recommended students to use these resources, I did not personally use these services until I was in my doctoral program. It was through this experience that I have become a huge proponent of counseling and therapy. This value for mental health services is evident in some of the interview questions that I ask about using resources.

I also identify as an introvert. Throughout my life, I have been an introspective person who has found comfort in solitude. Over time, I have become very self-aware of the different needs of introverts and extraverts, which is why my study incorporates both verbal and written methods of data collection so that individuals can find a medium that they are comfortable with to express themselves.

Lastly, I believe that my value for diversity and social justice is incorporated into this study. As someone who holds multiple underrepresented identities, it has become a passion of mine to uplift the voices of others who have often been silenced because they have not been given a platform to tell their truths. That is why this study was open to students at all levels in their higher education journey and why I chose narrative inquiry as the vehicle to conduct this research.

### **Summary**

This qualitative research study explores the following question: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity? Situated in a constructivist paradigm, two semi-structured interviews, and a journaling activity captured the narratives of bereaved college students. The collaboration between myself as the researcher and

the participants was essential to mutually construct meaning about the participants' narratives and create more understanding about their lived experiences. Additionally, it is important to note how I, as the researcher, have been incorporated into this study based on my personal experiences, interests, and upbringing.

## CHAPTER IV. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this research study was to understand and describe how college students academically persist within higher education after a death loss. As a reminder, the definition of academically persisting for this research study was that participants needed to have maintained a 2.0 term and cumulative GPA while staying enrolled in courses during the term of the death loss through the time that I interviewed participants. The 2.0 or higher GPA requirement also applied to graduate student participants, even though graduate students needed a 3.0 or higher GPA to be considered in good academic standing with their institution. My rationale for this decision was that I wanted to hear the narratives of bereaved students who were making adequate progress towards their degree requirements and who had an overall GPA that made them eligible to earn a degree, which all graduate student participants had met.

This qualitative research was guided by the overarching question: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity? Supplemental research questions to explore this topic included:

- How does a death loss shape students' experiences of college?
- What types of support systems do college students use during their bereavement?
- What drives students to continue their educational goals?

This chapter includes a profile of each individual who participated in this study and provides a snapshot of their story as a bereaved college student on their institution's campus.

### **Participants**

To be eligible for this study, participants who were selected needed to meet four requirements: (1) be at least 18 years old to participate; (2) experienced a death loss that was significant to them while they were in enrolled; (3) experienced their death loss at least two years

ago from the start of the study; and (4) maintained a 2.0 or higher term and cumulative GPA since the death loss. In addition to these four requirements, the Institutional Review Board at the private institution in the West region of the United States also required that participants scored between 1-10 on the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961) and completed an interested subject questionnaire.

Twelve students across three institutions of higher education responded to my initial recruitment efforts. Of these twelve students, seven students met all the requirements for this study and were invited to participate in this research. In this study, there are two undergraduate students and five graduate students.

Table 1

*Description of Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Collegiate Level	Type	Location
Allison	29	Woman	White	Master's	Public	Midwest
Claudia	27	Woman	Latina	Master's/doctoral	Public	West
Jessica	26	Woman	Multiracial	Master's/doctoral	Public	West
Luna	23	Woman	White	Bachelor's	Public	Midwest
Max	21	Man	White	Bachelor's	Private	West
Michelle	32	Woman	Multiracial	Doctoral	Public	West
Rokit	42	Man	Latino	Doctoral	Public	West

### **Participant Profiles**

At the beginning of this research study, each participant selected a pseudonym for themselves that I used throughout this manuscript to protect their identities. Additionally, I assigned pseudonyms to the deceased individuals mentioned in this study. To provide a closer look at the individuals who were interviewed for this study, information about the participants' death loss experiences are shared below. These profiles are not the participants' full biography

and do not encompass the entirety of their contributions to this research study or the time that we spent together. Instead, these profiles highlight the various aspects of the bereaved college student experience.

### **Claudia**

Claudia was a 27-year-old, Latina, out-of-state doctoral student who attended a large, public institution in the West region of the United States. Born into a low-income community, Claudia shared that her family members were located on both the East coast of the United States and in Central America. Aspiring to one-day work in academia, Claudia was attracted to her four-year public research institution because of the work that was produced by faculty members at this institution. In 2013, Claudia enrolled in a dual masters and doctoral program.

During the five years that Claudia was active in her graduate program, she experienced two significant death losses that included her cousin and later, her aunt. The first death loss took place during the second year that Claudia was in her program. Claudia remembered the exact moment when she learned that her cousin, Danny, had died. Danny had been living in Central America when Claudia was going to school. Claudia remembers that she was at home when she received the news of her cousin's passing from her late uncle's wife: "So she called me because they had published in the city's local newspaper that he was, you know, he was killed." Claudia recounted that Danny had been shot and killed in the streets of Central America as someone was trying to steal from him. As an only child, Claudia and Danny spent a lot of quality time with one another, whether it was going out to eat, exploring the city, or just joking around. Therefore, Danny's passing was a hard loss for Claudia because she was very close to Danny and considered him as a brother.

In addition to Claudia's close relationship with Danny, Danny's death was painful to come to terms with because he had taken such tremendous strides with turning his life around. Danny used to belong to a gang for many years. He also lived on the streets due to his drug addiction. "[H]e did drugs and things like that, but he was able to overcome that stage in his life, which I really admired about him." Although it was not easy, Danny was able to remove himself from the gang that he was a part of and started his own business. Claudia mentioned that Danny had reformed himself and became a Christian, singing and composing Christian music for people. "[H]e used to work at a Christian radio station doing a program for kids, so he really reformed his life and was just...He was overcoming that you know, very dark past of his." Claudia mentioned that when Danny died, he left behind a young daughter, which Claudia said made this situation even more heartbreaking.

After finishing the third year in her program, Claudia then lost her maternal aunt, Nora, who also lived in Central America. Claudia shared that her aunt Nora had many ailments and had suffered from diabetes and breast cancer. Claudia mentioned that she and her mother were able to visit her aunt Nora in Central America before her passing. What Claudia remembers from that visit was her aunt's drastic decline in health. Within one month, Claudia said:

She was in bed. She couldn't get up. We had to bathe her. We had to clean her. You know, so it was a really drastic change in her that I feel is not normal. So yeah, she went from zero to a whole different level.

Claudia recalled how difficult it was to see her aunt's declining condition: "So it was very tough to see someone who is strong and talking, to see them not be able to fend for themselves, depending on other people. So it's just very tough."



While Claudia's mother stayed in Central America to be with Nora, Claudia had to return to school in the United States. However, one week later, after returning from her trip, Claudia got a call that her aunt Nora had passed away. Claudia never had the chance to say goodbye to her aunt because: "I had the hope that when I returned back to [Central America], she was going to be better." Claudia shared that one of the reasons why her aunt Nora passed away was because "she didn't treat her breast cancer early, because she had found a small lump on her breast, but she didn't take care of it until really late." Additionally, Claudia mentioned that there was also some speculation around whether there may have been some foul play with the medical care that her aunt received. "We believe that one of the chemo she received was, I don't know. Altered or something? Because other patients had expressed concern about that doctor that she was seeing."

### **Shaping the Experience of College**

When I asked Claudia how the death losses shaped her college experience, she admitted that she felt a bit lost as a bereaved college student on her campus:

I guess speaking from my particular experience, I felt a little bit lost with guidance I guess. And it's just tough navigating, trying to navigate classes and research and you know all the responsibilities of a graduate student, all the same time going through all this. You know, the emotional part of it. It's just tough trying to I guess piece yourself back together, I guess. And like I guess, yeah, continue with your normal life.

During our conversations, one common topic that continued to show up was how the death losses affected Claudia's progress in her academic program. Typically, Claudia described herself as responsible, studious, and someone who met her deadlines. However, after the death losses, Claudia noticed that she started to fall behind in her coursework: "there was a lot happening and it was going to be very difficult to get back on board, I guess." An example that Claudia shared

was that she had been falling behind in finishing a project for her master's program and was one of the last people in her cohort to complete this project, which “brought me down significantly.” Claudia remembered seeing her peers performing better than she was and constantly compared herself to others: “when it took me more time to finish my project that like I’ve been a fraud all my life, or I don’t know. It’s just that I felt that. Sorry. Um, I don’t know. Like I felt like I wasn’t going to make it in a way.” After discussing her time in her dual master's/doctoral program, Claudia reflected on what she chose to share during the interview process:

[The] conversation opened my eyes as to how I usually self-criticize for finishing my master’s project later than my cohort, but in reality, it is okay because experiencing the deaths of two close family members is very tough, and it is very difficult to recover from. Changing one’s mindset and emotional state takes time and after someone’s death, especially of someone that you really loved.

Although it took Claudia longer than expected to complete this particular project in her graduate program, she finished it. Completing this large academic task provided her with more confidence in her program and helped her to pick up the momentum in her academic life.

### **Support Systems**

Claudia realized that she had not used any campus resources during her bereavement. She mentioned that she was not aware of what was available to her at that time: “But I didn’t know, or I still don’t know I guess of other resources to go to if things like this happen.” Although Claudia knew about counseling in a general sense, she had not thought to connect with the counseling and psychological services office on her campus during her bereavement. Claudia wrote in her journal:

I continue to reflect and question as to why I decided not to seek professional help (i.e., counseling) when the deaths of my cousin and aunt happened. When my cousin died, I should have sought professional help, and perhaps that would have helped me complete my master's project sooner than when I completed it.

Even though Claudia had not used any counseling services during the time that we had met, she mentioned that the primary support that she received during these difficult times came from her parents, other family members, and her partner at the time. Although Claudia was not certain if she was going to use counseling in the future, she said:

I didn't want to lose time, basically with class and projects and things like that. I felt like if I drained myself and you know, my emotions, I guess, during that time, that I would lose time. But then again, I don't know if I should have given myself that time to really, I don't know, process or I don't know. I don't even know what's the correct amount of time to, I guess, really grieve a person.

Looking back, Claudia wished that her faculty members provided her with more support by mentioning these types of campus resources for her. Unfortunately, Claudia said that her advisor, who was also her faculty member, was not very accessible and did not provide her much support during these hard times. Although Claudia had chosen her institution because of the faculty expertise in her program, she shared that she rarely had any opportunities to see her advisor because they had left on sabbatical multiple times. Claudia mentioned that she was able to meet with her advisor only once during her term and that she had not been emotionally present for her:

She is not the type to check-in to see how you're doing. And it's also very hard to meet with her. She's very busy. She's on all these projects, she's teaching, she's traveling. So

yeah, a lot of us, a lot of her students, like that's our frustration that we aren't able to meet with her.

Besides not being able to access her advisor regularly, Claudia also expressed some challenges that she came across when her advisor tried to coach her out of finishing her graduate program:

So in the beginning of my fourth year, she sat down with me and the graduate officer, the one who overlooks all graduate students in our program. And you know, they asked me what's wrong? Why is it taking you so long to finish? You know, if you don't finish the project by this year, you won't be able to make it, you know, you won't. They basically, they were telling me that I wasn't going to finish the Ph.D. program. And my advisor was even, she said, just finish the program and graduate with the master's and you can go. I was like, oh no. That is not the goal. My goal is to get a Ph.D., not a master's. You know, I didn't make all these sacrifices to just get a master's. When she said that, it's like, I felt like I was making her look bad in a way because I guess, you know the professors when they meet, they discuss how their students are doing, so maybe I was making her look bad. Because I guess they discuss the progress of their students and everything like that. So in a way, I felt like I was letting her down.

When asked if Claudia ever reached out for any academic assistance or accommodations in her coursework, she responded:

No, I didn't. Because I felt like, not ashamed, but what's the word? Like I didn't want them to show pity, I guess. I don't know. So yeah, I guess in a way I felt shame, so I didn't ask for you know, any extensions or even on the project, and I feel like that is something I've learned to be, just to communicate to people so that they know what you're going through if something bad is happening.

Despite these early academic setbacks, Claudia was able to persist in her program after being proactive and seeking help from other faculty members who invested in her.

### **Continuing her Educational Goals**

The lack of support and confidence from Claudia's advisor was disappointing. However, this later became something that motivated Claudia to prove to her advisor and herself that she deserved to be at the institution and that she could do well in the program. These events led Claudia to take it upon herself to find a new faculty member who would invest in her both personally as well as academically. Claudia admitted that "seeking that other professor really helped me a lot because she guided me through the process, you know? Like A to Z, basically." Claudia was so appreciative that this other professor was making time for her when she was not one of her students. One example of this was that when Claudia was preparing for her qualifying exams, she was able to meet with this professor every two weeks, which was more time than she had ever received from her original advisor. Because of this strong relationship that Claudia formed with her new professor, she was going to ask her to be her co-chair: "She's been a great mentor. I feel like she cares about my needs, my feelings, you know, she's like if something comes up, let me know. If you can meet, let me know and tell me what's happening, so I feel like, I feel like I haven't gotten that from my advisor." Having this strong faculty connection and support helped Claudia progress in her program.

### **Jessica**

Jessica was a 26-year-old, first-generation, multiracial, doctoral student from the East coast who attended a large, public institution in the West region of the United States. Jessica was looking for a graduate program in a warm climate that was in a different geographical location from where she grew up and went to school. When she discovered her program, she enrolled in

their dual master's and doctoral program. Similar to Claudia, Jessica wanted to be a faculty member and believes that her current academic program will help her to become a professor.

I interviewed Jessica when she was in the fourth year of her graduate program. She shared with me that she had experienced two death losses during the second year of her program. Both of the people who Jessica had lost were people who she met during her undergraduate career. Jessica lost her friend, Susan, who was murdered and lost another friend, James, due to a drug overdose.

Jessica had met Susan during their first year in college. Both Jessica and Susan lived in the same residential community, but what drew Jessica to Susan was her vibrant personality and their shared interests. "We would do plays together, and that's how our friendship blossomed, and so we hung out a lot through our mutual love of theater and our greater friend group that all connected." Some of Jessica's favorite memories of Susan were listening to music and doing interpretive dances together. Jessica and Susan's friendship continued after they completed their undergraduate degree, and they remained in communication with one another even when Jessica moved across the country to start her graduate program. However, during the fall of Jessica's second year in graduate school, she learned that Susan had died. Jessica remembers the exact day that she heard about Susan's passing. She was about to spend Thanksgiving with her partner's family when she received a text message about Susan's death. Through the text message she received, Jessica learned that Susan had been murdered by her boyfriend, who she had been dating for only a few months. Jessica recalls what it was like to process the information with her partner, Matthew:

I got to Matthew's house, and they are all ready to celebrate Thanksgiving and everything, and it was just very bizarre timing. And I remember feeling kind of blurry, so

I didn't say anything until partway through dinner or something when I had to go excuse myself. And then I went into Matthew's room, and he followed me, and that's when I finally cried and like actually told someone about the situation.

It took some time for the news of Susan's death to settle in and for Jessica to realize what had happened. The geographical distance that separated Jessica from those who knew Susan made processing this news difficult. However, Jessica was able to return to the East coast to attend Susan's funeral.

A few months after Susan's passing, Jessica lost another friend from college named James. Jessica had known James because he was in Matthew's fraternity. "[T]hroughout the whole time of college, we hung out pretty consistently." What Jessica remembers most fondly of James was his overall persona and funny moments that they would share. Jessica explained that James had struggled with a heroin addiction for years, which eventually took his life. James had been in and out of a rehabilitation facility near Jessica's graduate school, so she was able to see him a few times both before and after he completed his time in his rehabilitation program.

Jessica knew that death was a possible outcome for James due to his addiction, especially since she had seen him during one of the lowest points in his life when he was thin and pale. However, she started to relax when James checked himself back into the rehabilitation center because "the last time I saw him, his face looked flushed again, and he looked, seemed much more like himself." Unfortunately, after James finished the rehabilitation program, he returned to the East coast, overdosed, and passed away. Jessica had also learned of James' death through a text from a mutual friend.

## Shaping the Experience of College

After the two death losses, Jessica expressed that she began to feel overwhelmed, especially as a graduate student:

[T]hings seemed kind of small in those few months in that like it just seemed so overwhelming and but I had to push through and by doing that I would focus on the day to day a lot more as opposed to big-picture items, and so I feel especially having something to compare it to now, like the way that I'm feeling and the way that I'm moving through my fourth year. I felt kind of consumed with my second year of school. It was all kind of consuming, and I was really glad to have it be over with, and perhaps that wouldn't have been the case if those two deaths didn't happen, and it was just the standard stressors of grad school without the added losses.

Anxiety soon began to appear in Jessica's life and ended up negatively impacting her emotional state. She saw this creep into some of her closest relationships:

It affected my mental health pretty negatively, and like my view of how fragile my relationships with people were. I felt especially in the month that followed that I couldn't really rely on anything or anyone, not as a fault to theirs, but just a fault as how fragile life is. It just feels weird to be building all these relationships and like loving people, and all of a sudden, they just be gone, and I had a lot of issues coming to terms with how to deal with that. And how to not let it make me anxious all the time.

Jessica's anxiety began to show up on campus: "I felt the anxiety creeping in and have emotional episodes on campus where I had to go find a space by myself, which is absolutely not what I wanted to be happening when I was trying to get to class or had a meeting with my advisor, what have you."



Although school was a good distraction for Jessica when she was grieving the death of her two good friends, Jessica started to see her administrative skills diminish. Jessica explained that this was out of the ordinary for her: “I wasn’t pleased with my performance, especially in comparison to what it was before.” For example, Jessica shared that: “The months right after the second death, I felt that I was not as on top as I would have been. A little bit later, with emails, sometimes a bit late with sending in assignments.” She also mentioned that she was less involved with activities on campus. Typically, Jessica would have been drawn to academic and co-curricular activities. However, “those definitely dropped, like during winter and spring quarter, I was just trying to focus on the things that I absolutely had to get done and do those things as best as I could.”

The death losses took an emotional toll on Jessica, and she felt that there was no way for her to take a break from her program since her institution followed the quarter system. “I kept coming back to the idea that I couldn’t really take a break, and I didn’t want to because like I said, the distraction was helpful to me, but I also simultaneously felt that I couldn’t, especially with the quarter system.” As someone who had a history of being a high achieving student, Jessica continued to struggle with the aftermath of her friend’s death but presented herself as an ideal student to others.

What helped Jessica to adjust to her friend’s passing was her increased spirituality. Jessica explained how she connected her spirituality with her new, positive outlook on life:

I mean, I wasn’t able to reframe my thoughts positively without connecting them to the thought that in some way, we’re still connected. In some way, there is still a way to communicate or connect to them. Yeah. I really couldn’t wrap my head around that they would be completely finalized or just completely gone.

Jessica's spirituality was an important factor that helped her to move forward following her death losses.

### **Support Systems**

It was a busy time in the academic year for Jessica when she learned about the deaths of Susan and James: "These two deaths of people in my close friend group happened pretty successively in different, like separate, but upsetting ways. And this was the year too, that I was taking my qualifying exams in the spring. So it was happening all at once." With these types of stressful events happening in her life, Jessica turned towards her partner, Matthew.

Jessica and Matthew are currently engaged and living in the same city, but when these two death losses happened, they had been living on opposite sides of the country. Despite the distance, Jessica shared that Matthew played a significant role in supporting her during this time. Since the two of them shared many similar circles during college and hung out with each other's friends, Jessica was able to confide in Matthew about the struggles that she was experiencing and he was always there for her:

He was really sweet and stayed up late and was always sure to say like, 'Whenever you need to talk about it or wake me up in the middle of the night, whatever you need, I'll be there,' which is great. But he was really focused on his conversations about helping me reframe things positively again.

For example, Matthew would "focus on remembering and being appreciative of the moments they did have to spend together and that we all had to spend together and not letting that overshadow the relationships that we have now with worry and anxiety."

In addition to having Matthew as a support system, Jessica also had a strong network of friends to support her. These friends had also been close to Susan and James. As it turned out,

some of these friends were close in proximity to Jessica during this time, which allowed Jessica to be in solidarity with others over their shared experiences. Jessica would go over to her friends' homes on the weekend where they would have long talks and sleepovers: "It helped a lot that there was someone in the immediate space that like got it and was ready to talk through that, so I do realize that it was a great resource to have them around." Just the fact that Jessica could talk about Susan and James with her friends helped Jessica with her healing process because: "it helps keep them alive in a certain sense and also helps us bond."

Although Jessica had a robust support system to turn towards, she was also open and honest about her overall state after experiencing the death losses. She mentioned that she experienced a shift in her anxiety levels and began navigating mental health issues for the first time in her life. Jessica had known about the counseling and psychological services that were available to her at her institution because she had seen multiple emails about these services. Still, she did not make use of this resource after either of the death losses:

I felt like so mentally kind of debilitated in the sense that I was having these struggles with anxiety and that, it makes sense considering what happened, but just not ever been a person that had struggles. Like you know, long term, chronic struggles with mental health, so that was a new territory for me to be in, and it did make me even more empathetic to a lot of close friends that I have that struggle with this very long and chronically. But yeah, it was a surprising new space to be navigating.

These new anxieties began to alter Jessica's views on relationships, which created a sense of constant worry if she had not heard from family or friends. If she didn't hear back from someone right away, she would often think of worst-case scenarios that might have happened. Jessica worried that seeing someone from mental health services would have prolonged her sadness. She

regrets not utilizing this resource and thinks that it may have helped her with her healing process. “That’s something in retrospect that I kind of regret. I’m still even toying with the idea of going to see like a therapist or utilizing some of the mental health resources on campus.”

Jessica did not feel comfortable disclosing her death losses with others. She did not share this information with her faculty members because she did not see a clear segue to start this conversation. Additionally, Jessica established professional boundaries with her professors. She said: “I didn’t really feel comfortable talking to my professors about it, just from my own personal history of wanting to be super professional and not bringing emotions into things and so I don’t blame anyone at all for not speaking to me about it, because I didn’t bring it forward.” Therefore, only a few close friends and family members knew what had happened.

### **Continuing her Educational Goals**

Jessica mentioned two things that helped her to continue with her educational goals: her people-pleasing tendencies and her inner optimism. As mentioned earlier, Jessica noticed that her administrative skills started to slip after the death losses, and her people-pleasing tendencies started to kick in. Missing a deadline became a wake-up call for her to start re-focusing on her academics. “Like I missed a deadline, that wasn’t a huge deal at the end, but that was a wake-up call to me, like I need to talk to someone about this or let go of some commitments.” Because Jessica wanted to maintain strong relationships with her professors and colleagues, her drive to please others became a huge motivator for her to put her best foot forward. Jessica said, “[E]ven though I was going through this mourning process, I didn’t want it to change the way that people perceive me as a scholar and as a classmate.”

Additionally, Jessica reflected that rediscovering her optimism helped her to continue with her educational goals. One strategy that Jessica started to implement was reframing her

current situation by reassuring herself that, “everything is going to be okay, and there’s a reason why I’m doing the work that I’m doing.” By reminding herself why she started her graduate program and what made her want to do it, Jessica continued to persevere. According to Jessica, “pursuing that coursework and research was important for pushing through.” Getting back on track with her academics has helped Jessica to regain her confidence to make progress in her program.

### **Luna**

Luna was a 23-year-old White female who was in her fifth year of attending a public institution in the Midwest. As a first-generation college student working towards her bachelor’s degree, Luna shared that her current institution had not been on her radar in high school. However, she visited campus with one of her friends and was attracted to one of their learning communities that focused on education, so she applied rather late and was accepted. Although Luna was an in-state student who started as an education major, she later switched to a psychology major with an art history minor.

After her second year in college, Luna was placed on academic probation and had left school for a year. She explained that she struggled academically due to an undiagnosed disability. However, when Luna returned to campus for her third year, she experienced the death loss of Charlie, her father’s best friend.

Luna had known Charlie since she was ten years old and had many fond memories of him. Some of her favorite memories of Charlie were when they used to hang out at the membership bar that Luna’s family belongs to because there was always laughter whenever he was there. Although Luna has a father who is involved in her life, she was also very close to Charlie and even considered him to be a father-figure. Luna shared that Charlie had passed away

from cancer. Charlie had informed Luna and her family that he had cancer the year before he passed away. Charlie started some treatments to address this disease. However, Luna believes the treatments were not as effective as they could have been since Charlie had not discovered the cancer early. “He was kind of in that generation where they never really liked going to the doctor.” Ultimately, Charlie decided to stop his treatments because he did not want to put himself through that process anymore and died shortly after.

When Charlie passed, Luna was about to wrap up the end of her third year: “he passed away during the end of the semester, like really close to exams, because it was later in April.” Due to the academic calendar, Luna was not able to see Charlie during his final days because of her schedule. “I hadn’t seen him for weeks because it was around this time when all these final projects are due and papers, so I was constantly in the library, and I had no time to leave so, yeah, it was hard.”

Although it was a busy time of the year, Luna vividly remembers that she had planned to see Charlie the day that he passed. Unfortunately, she regrets that circumstances changed that day which prevented her from seeing him:

He was at home constantly, and just, he had an aide come in and help him. And I was supposed to go see him that day, depending on if his wife said it was okay or not, and my mom called me and said we’re not going to go today because you know, they’re busy and they had so many people there today, and they don’t want anyone else. And then about two hours later, my mom called me back and was like, okay, well, he just passed away an hour ago.

Luna further explained that in addition to there being a lot of visitors that day, her mom had wanted her to wait to visit Charlie so that they could both see Charlie together. As a result, Luna

was left feeling annoyed that she could have seen Charlie before he died if she went to see Charlie by herself.

### **Shaping the Experience of College**

The most prominent way that Charlie's death loss shaped Luna's college experience was how she interacted with people who knew about her death loss and how she showed up in spaces. For instance, Luna shared her frustrations about the way people reacted when she shared her death loss experience:

Most of them, when I told them, they got that pity in their eyes, like, 'Ohhhhhh.' I hate when people do that. So it was like, it got to the point where, when I started to tell people that needed to know or that I was coming to terms with it, and I was like, 'hey, I need you to know this is happening to me.' I just got really short.

Luna began to make it clear to others when she did not want to extend the conversation and talk about the death loss, and she was also adamant that she did not want to be treated differently: "I don't like it when people tiptoe around me. And when they kind of treat me like this fragile little thing that will break. Like, treat me like a normal person, please."

Luna mentioned that she did have to tell a few of her professors about Charlie's death because she needed to miss class to attend his funeral. Luna felt that she needed to communicate this to her professors because she had already used her absences that she was allotted in class. However, she recalled that one professor coddled her too much for her liking. Luna said that they were "babying me to the point where like I didn't really want to go to them anymore." Generally, Luna expressed that she would have preferred not to disclose this type of information to her professors because:

I'm just a very, I keep a lot of things to myself, plus I don't like to feel vulnerable to people like in certain situations, and I'm very open about my mental illness, so all my professors always know about it because I use accessibility services for some things. So any other thing that happens in my life, if it's impactful on my emotions, I don't tell anybody unless it's strictly necessary.

Luna only told professors this type of information when it was necessary, such as when she needed to miss class.

Luna also noticed differences in how she was showing up with her friends. She admitted that she is an introvert and that after Charlie died, she had cut herself off from a lot of her friends: "when big things happen that impact me, it gets a lot worse where I'm like I don't want anyone around me right now. I just want to be alone, and sometimes I'll want to be around my parents." Therefore she would often turn down invitations to hang out because she was not in the space to meet new people or try new things. When she started to reintegrate herself back with her friends and social network, she recalled: "I apologized and was like, hey I know I've been kind of a shitty friend. I was just trying to process this whole thing that happened. The only way that I knew how to do that was by myself. And I couldn't have other people around me."

Luna's natural tendency was to close herself off to others during hard times, but this began to change after she attended Charlie's funeral. Attending Charlie's service and burial was very influential for Luna because she was able to see the large impact that Charlie had on others based on the number of people who attended his service. This visual inspired Luna to live her life differently in terms of her connection with others:

I go to a classroom. I'm like, yes. I'm an introvert, but I'm going to be social with people, so ever since he did pass, I am more social in my classes, even if it's making one more



friend or something. I guess only because I noticed how he did impact and how many people he helped through his business, and just his friend group and his life and everything.

Now, Luna is more vocal in classes and has been making more connections with her classmates than she had previously done.

### **Support Systems**

I had asked Luna if she used any resources on campus after Charlie's death loss, and she said: "I think that whenever someone says resources, I always automatically go to like the counseling center." None of Luna's professors mentioned counseling and psychological services to Luna, even when she had disclosed her death loss to them. However, Luna said that she had known about counseling and psychological services and had tried their services:

I actually went there once, but it wasn't a very good experience, so I never went back.

Because I was like, I think it was just the person I was with. They weren't really understanding. I just felt judged when I was in there, so I told myself I would never go back there.

Due to the poor service Luna received on campus, she decided to see a therapist off-campus: "I think around this time I was going every other week, every three weeks, just because he was like, something's wrong. You're shutting yourself out again, so we're going to keep talking until you stop doing that." Luna disclosed that she often minimizes what she is going through and tells others that she is good, when in reality, that may be far from the truth. Luna recounted a conversation that she had with one of her faculty members: "So I kind of played it off to them that I was fine, but I have to go to this thing, which wasn't the case. I wasn't fine. But I have this thing where I just make everyone think its fine. So I mean they offered me the support, like if

you need more time, let us know. And if you need more time to work on whatever's due, let us know."

Luna's roommate also helped her during some of the difficult times. After Charlie passed away, Luna's roommate noticed changes in her typical routines and made sure that Luna continued to stay on top of important things in her life: "So she kind of made sure that I was eating because I have weird eating schedules. But kind of when it happened, I would stay in my bed a lot, and I wouldn't do anything, so she made sure that I ate and made sure that I was getting up in time for work." It was this type of checking in and accountability that helped Luna to make sure that she was taking care of herself and doing the things that she needed to do, especially when academic papers and projects were assigned.

### **Continuing her Educational Goals**

As mentioned earlier, Charlie passed away the year that Luna returned to campus after she had taken a break from being on academic probation. Although Luna was still struggling to improve her GPA, going to classes after Charlie's death was one way for Luna to get out of her apartment, socialize with people, and feel productive:

I liked it more than I usually do because of the noise you can be around because I would just sit in my apartment for a while, like in my room, and not really do anything. So the social aspect is something that I was like, this is good, you're going out, you're doing things...my friend was like all you do is sit in your room, but I was like, no, I go out. I do things. But in reality, I was just going to class.

Luna explained that she threw herself into her schoolwork after Charlie passed away because "this is something that I can control, so this is what I'm going to do." Additionally, "I think kind

of me avoiding it and the emotions that had to do with it spurred me on academically because this was a distraction, so I'm going to keep going."

Part of Luna's drive to continue with her educational goals came from Charlie because he was often one of Luna's biggest academic supporters. Luna fondly referred to Charlie as her "personal hype man" when it came to her university studies. Luna shared that when she switched her major a few times, her parents had gotten a little annoyed, but Charlie was always supportive of Luna and her decisions. Thinking about Charlie rooting for her helped Luna to continue to make progress in her academic program. "When I do think about quitting, because it happens so often, I think back to those types of talks because he was like, 'you're doing good' and 'you're on the right track' and 'you can do this.' So he was always, always, supportive." Therefore, Luna refused to be on academic probation anymore. She said, "I had to get really good grades to bring my GPA up to be able to not get that stupid email again, so I definitely applied myself into everything at that point because it was okay at the beginning of the semester when all this happened and I was doing okay. But that, that was it. And after this happened, I was like I'm going to be great."

Charlie's passing also shaped Luna's career trajectory. Luna still plans to graduate as a psychology major with an art history minor. However, her death loss experience has inspired her to follow a new career path. Luna said, "It wasn't until after he passed that I wanted to get my counseling degree. I think it's because I was going to therapy so often, and I was like, this helps. And I was like, 'I want to help people this way.'" Charlie's passing reminded Luna about the death loss of her godfather that occurred when she was in high school. Circumstances were very similar in that Luna did not see her godfather before he passed, because he had died after complications with heart surgery.

Because all this time, when all this was happening, and I was in therapy, I kind of kept going back to when I was in high school when my godfather died, and I didn't have that help. And then I started thinking about other teenagers who go through this and don't have the help, and I want to be able to help them with that.

These memories on top of Charlie's recent passing have helped Luna to clarify how her past experiences could be helpful for others.

### **Allison**

Before introducing the next participant, Allison, it is important to note that she differs from the other participants in this study because she did not believe that she had academically persisted. Allison met the eligibility criteria to participate in this study and knew that this research was on bereaved college students and academic persistence. However, because she changed programs and graduated with a different master's degree than the one she originally pursued, she did not believe she academically persisted. Although Allison needed to change her program focus, her story of educational resilience was remarkable and I wanted to honor her story. After consulting with the advisors for this dissertation, we agreed that Allison's narrative was compelling. Allison's narrative provided thick, rich descriptions that were very powerful and I made the decision to include her story in this manuscript.

Allison was a 29-year-old, White, graduate student who attended a public institution in the Midwest. As an out-of-state student, Allison had grown up in a low socioeconomic status home in Appalachia. She was attracted to her graduate program because she had received in-state tuition for her master's degree in interdisciplinary studies with an emphasis in speech-language pathology and e-learning. "[I]t was very competitive. They also gave me a full scholarship for one year and a teaching assistantship, so that was [the] incentive."

One of Allison's most salient identities was identifying as a foster child. Allison never knew who her father was. There was an "X" in place of his name on her birth certificate. However, her mother was still present in her life. The reason why Allison considered herself to be a foster child was that her great grandparents were her primary caregivers. "[F]rom the hospital to graduation, I was at their house." Due to this unique family dynamic, Allison disclosed that she often had to defend her status as a foster child to others.

During the first month of attending her master's program, Allison experienced a significant death loss when her great grandfather, Jim, passed away. Jim had been one of the only male figures in her life, and with no other men in her family, Jim became a prominent father figure to Allison, and his death loss greatly impacted her. Allison shared that Jim was disabled, and she was not sure if he was literate. However, some of her favorite memories with Jim were when they would sit together on the porch outside, working on coloring books.

Although it had been a few years since Jim's passing, Allison often had tears in her eyes or stopped to cry throughout the interview when she spoke about Jim. Allison said, "[Y]ou know, it's not really shocking because he is my great grandparent, so I know that this would happen sooner rather than later, but that's still, sorry those are my parents, you know?" Allison further explained that Jim, "was the person I loved the most in my whole life."

Allison shared that disclosing the death loss of Jim was a struggle due to the responses that she received from others. Allison shared that people would often not understand why the death loss of her great grandfather impacted her so much, or they would compare their death loss experiences with her. However, Allison shared how these types of comments didn't land with her well:

He was my immediate family member, so that was lost on people who were like, oh yeah, my grandma died too. And in those comments, I would just say it's not just... I would say to them, 'Hey stop. He's not just my great grandpa. He is the only father-figure I ever had. I considered him like that, and the way that you're saying it sounds kind of dismissive.'

Allison knew that Jim's passing was inevitable due to his age, but his death loss was unexpected to her due to the events surrounding his death. Allison explained that her family members were uneducated and had difficulties communicating with others. From the information that Allison gathered, she understands that Jim had been checked into the hospital, but was later released to go home. However, shortly after his release, something else occurred with Jim's health, and he passed away. Unfortunately, Allison's family members "didn't think to communicate some things that were happening. So it was very shocking to me and to the family. We all thought that he was coming home."

Allison remembered how she found out about the death loss. She recalled that at that time, she was still really excited about being in graduate school since it was the first few weeks into the academic year. Allison had put her clothes out for the morning and went to sleep, feeling ready for the next day. However, she said that her mother had sent her a Facebook message to tell her about Jim's passing. Allison believes Facebook was the platform that her mother chose due to her limitations. "[She] had a stroke and has some difficulties cognitively, and for whatever reason it is, she has difficulties making phone calls, like her phone is too complicated for her, but the Facebook app isn't." Jim's death did not sit well with Allison, and she remembered feeling so upset about the news. "I was just so, like I had to pace back and forth frantically, and I went outside on my porch, and I just sat there gasping for air. Like so bereaved."

## Shaping the Experience of College

One way that Jim's death shaped Allison's college experience was that she started to carry a sense of anger with her. Allison's cohort members had found out about Jim's death through Allison's social media account. They provided her with a sympathy card, a potted plant, and a Chipotle gift card, which both confused and frustrated Allison. She said:

I remember being so frustrated because I ride my bike to campus, and I'm like, I have this stupid potted plant to deal with, and I was so angry at everyone for no reason. And I carried this resentment with me, and every little thing irritated me. The compassion that my classmates were trying to show me was not what I wanted, and it was the wrong kind of thing at the wrong time, and I got so frustrated a lot. I remember like more anger than I am used to when I initially got back because the world was so degrading to me to re-integrate my life and pretend that everything was fine.

Allison felt that one reason why she was so angry with her classmates was that she thought that they were only doing things that made them feel better instead of what would make her feel better. For instance, rather than getting asked by her classmates to go out drinking, she wished that they would have validated her feelings and helped study with her.

After Jim's death, Allison became apathetic in her co-curricular activities, such as her involvement in a graduate student organization. When reflecting on her time within this organization, Allison admitted that she would have done things differently.

I just didn't care enough to, like I could have and should have relayed more information from [the organization] to my constituents, but I didn't do that because I felt like my constituents wouldn't even care. And this is extra work for me, and I'm not going to do

that. I think usually I would have because I'm extra communicative and would rather share those programs, but I just didn't do that.

As far as her academics, Allison became more distracted. Allison explained that there was a cemetery on campus where burials would be taking place when class was in session. Since her program overlooks this cemetery, Allison said, "This was like extra triggering to me sometimes. There's one time that I looked out the window, and there was this burial going on, and I just lost it." This sight made Allison think about Jim's funeral, and she would end up crying for hours in the building. She continued to say that her "status as a bereaved student was not something that I could ignore."

Allison noticed that the overstimulation from the death loss caused her to develop new, worse habits that began showing up in academic spaces, including a noticeable decline in her concentration and cognitive abilities. Allison said that her faculty members and her clinical director told her that she was not making any sense, both in verbal and written form, and that she was not thinking clearly: "My concentration was completely awful. Just awful. I didn't realize this. Only other people told me this. That I would talk and that I didn't make any sense. And like you just came to the wrong conclusions, and it seems like you're not thinking clearly."

In addition to receiving feedback about the decline in her cognitive abilities, Allison also saw that her administrative tasks started to suffer. Paperwork that was due was submitted late, she would get dates mixed up, and she noticed that her academic priorities changed: "I felt that the stupid assignments that we did. Like what a waste of my time." Working from this state of mind, Allison said: "I just completely lost that ability to care about that kind of stuff." As a result, Allison failed her clinical tests twice:



I failed clinic the first semester, immediately during the death loss. Failed. They're like, 'Your interaction with your clients- fine. Paperwork and all this, everything else, totally not fine.' For professionalism reasons, I failed the first time. The next semester I took off. I was like, I'm not going to do clinic this semester. I'm going to get right with myself, get established with counseling, get my [medication] under control...And then the third semester still failed for disorganization and paperwork stuff.

As a result, Allison was dismissed from her program. Although her GPA was adequate, she was dismissed because she had failed clinic, which was a pass/fail grade for her program. Although Allison met the requirements to participate in this study, including the minimum GPA requirement, she did not feel that she was academically successful. In addition to not receiving her intended degree, Allison said, "I was struggling, scrambling, running on fumes the entire time."

### **Support Systems**

Allison shared that she had been diagnosed with depression when she was 14 years old and had a history of being in counseling since she was a teenager. Although Allison admitted that she had felt suicidal after her great grandfather Jim's death, she shared that she no longer felt that way now. With her previous experience in counseling, Allison knew that she needed to get in contact with a counselor when these feelings started to appear. Allison said that she had attempted to use counseling and psychological services on her campus, but she did not connect with the two assigned counselors. After those experiences, Allison decided to seek help from her regular doctor so that she could get back on her medication again and so that she could find a new counselor off campus that she liked better. Seeing an off-campus counselor was great for Allison because she said she didn't have to wait as long to see someone.

Allison also shared that she communicated with a few campus employees during her bereavement, but they were not very helpful. The first person she mentioned was the dean of students. Allison had known about the dean of students from her previous institution, but she felt that the dean of students in her graduate school was less approachable, and she said, “I really wish that the dean of students would have really been my friend more.” However, she emailed the office of the dean of students to notify them about Jim’s death and asked for assistance about knowing what her rights were as a student in light of the death loss. The dean of students referred Allison to her graduate student coordinator.

The graduate student coordinator then reached out to Allison since she needed to take time off from clinic. Although this particular memory was not very detailed, Allison did remember an instance when the graduate student coordinator had followed protocol and called 911 when Allison was dealing with suicidal ideation. “I was literally taken by the police to counseling. And I was like, this is insane. This is such an overreaction, and I don’t need this.” However, Allison understood why these protocols are in place and knew that her graduate student coordinator had to do her job, but, “it hurt me. It didn’t help me.” Allison felt that the response she received was over the top since she was already in care at the time.

### **Continuing her Educational Goals**

Allison did not view herself as being academically persistent since she was dismissed from her program. However, she attributed her self-efficacy to her upbringing and her love for Jim: “I grew up really poor, and I had to work a lot. Like I said, I was fostered. I wasn’t neglected at all, but I was basically just left alone all the time. So I developed this self-efficacy to take care of my basic needs and my emotional needs, so I just continue with that.” Additionally, Allison’s background as a Buddhist meant that she believed that Jim’s spirit continued to remain

close by, which brought her distress: “I’m really scared that my continued failure to like move on is keeping him as a ghost.” As a result, Allison wanted to get her life back on track so that Jim would not have to worry about her and could easily transition.

Allison said that what helped her finish her master's degree was the ambivalence of the university:

My programs are like, well, we spent all this money on you, you know you are in therapy, you show a lot of promise, why can’t you do the paperwork, you know? So I feel like their ambivalence of understanding whether or not I was good enough kind of prolonged it and let me take more classes for a while.

The program that Allison had initially enrolled in typically took five semesters to complete, but Allison was able to finish with a master's degree in four semesters. Since Allison only needed 30 credits to graduate, and she had already accumulated 45 credits, she was able to take a few e-learning classes to get what she called a “generic master's degree.” She reflected: “I can’t see the benefit yet, because I didn’t get what I came for. But I’m positive that later in my life, I will be more thankful for that.” Although Allison did not get the license from her institution that would allow her to do what she wanted to do professionally, she was able to finish her degree earlier than initially expected.

### **Max**

Max was a 21-year-old, White, male, undergraduate student who attended a private school in the West region institution of the United States. Max was an out-of-state student and said that he decided on his current institution because he originally wanted to attend an academically rigorous institution since he started as pre-med, but later switched to be a biology/chemistry major. Max played baseball for his school, which he did for a few years. Max

also had received a generous financial aid package. All these factors led Max to choose his current institution, especially since he is paying for his college education by himself. Max was a rising senior at the time that he was interviewed.

Max shared that he had experienced two death losses during his undergraduate career, his paternal great grandmother as well as his maternal grandfather. During Max's second year in college, his 94-year-old paternal great grandmother, Dorris, passed away during winter break on Christmas Eve. Some of Max's favorite memories of Dorris were her love for England's royal family and her routine of drinking beer and watching World Wrestling Entertainment. As Dorris grew older, dementia set in, and she moved into a retirement home. Max shared that his great grandmother's health started to decline over three years, and she had forgotten who he was. These events helped Max to prepare for and make peace with her passing: "If you're prepared for it, you can start grieving almost early, and kind of get a head start on it. So I was able to kind of prepare myself for having to lose her." Because Max and his family saw their great grandmother's quality of life decline, her passing was less emotional because they had already started to anticipate her loss.

The following year, Max experienced the death loss of his maternal grandfather, Bob. Some of Max's favorite memories of Bob were going to his winter home to go fishing and the time when his grandpa took him to the first Whataburger in Corpus Christi. He also shared stories of Bob at church and fondly remembered his grandpa shaking a soda can full of pennies early in the morning to train his dog to stop barking.

Bob had prostate cancer and had been in remission. After feeling sick for a few weeks, Bob checked into the hospital and was released with medication. One week later, Bob was checked back into the hospital and died within a day. Max was on campus and had just started

the first month of classes of his junior year when he learned that his grandfather had died. Just as his great grandmother died on a significant day, Max's grandfather passed away on Max's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

### **Shaping the Experience of College**

Max practiced Roman Catholicism and believed that his faith had helped him to respond to the death losses reasonably well. When his maternal grandfather passed, Max said that his mother did not take the news very well, especially since she was not there for her father's passing since everything happened so quickly. Earlier in her life, Max's mother had lost her brother, which caused her to have "severe depression for at least five or six years." Another death in the family continued to be difficult for Max's mother, which impacted Max in that he hated to see his mother in pain.

Although Max's mother struggled with her father's death, Max was able to frame his grandfather's death in a more positive light, sharing that: "I believe in an afterlife, and I believe that he's taken care of, but I don't like seeing my mom that hurt." Therefore the death losses that Max experienced shaped his college experience by strengthening his faith: "I grew stronger, I went to church more often, I felt an urge to go to church." Max's belief allowed him to see death as not an end to things. Instead, he believed that he would see his loved ones again someday. Additionally, he shared that his faith continued to reassure him that his loved ones were okay: "I really stepped into my faith in times of loss, and I think that really helped me a lot."

One way that Max felt that the death losses shaped his college experience was that it helped him to mature. This maturation helped Max to re-prioritize how he spent his time, and as a result, Max said that his academics never took a hit after the two death losses:

I think it made me really serious about life. It was like a wakeup call. So I still hang out with friends and stuff, but I don't spend as much time with going out as I used to. And also, my academic courses got harder, and classes got harder. So I didn't even have time to question whether or not I had to get back and study as hard as I can.

As a biology/chemistry major, Max had his sights set on attending dental school for either oral surgery or oral reconstructive surgery. Max reflected that the intensity that he applied to his academic work became a good distraction for him in light of the death losses because it was helping him to work towards his goals.

### **Support Systems**

As an out-of-state student, Max was geographically far from his family and was physically at college when these death losses happened. However, one person that was particularly supportive of Max during this time was his girlfriend, Joyce:

[M]y girlfriend was very supportive. And she's someone that I can call or text anytime. I can confide in her whenever I have to say something because being away from family physically was really hard. I think it would have been a lot easier [to be with family]. For my great grandma, I had my family because it was over winter break, but for my grandpa, I wasn't. And it was happening on my birthday too that day. So my grandpa, I really did confide in my girlfriend, and she helped me a lot, and she's very street smart. She's got that intuition, so she was very supportive.

Max shared that the weekend after his grandfather died, his girlfriend's family had invited him to their place. He remembers how nice it was to have dinner with them and enjoy a home-cooked meal. Having Joyce and her family around "helped because I was away from my own family, so it was nice. I think that having a place to escape from the everyday helped a lot." Max later

reflected that his grandfather's death loss resulted in him having a stronger relationship with his girlfriend and her family.

Besides disclosing his death loss experiences with Joyce, Max did not share this information with many others. He felt like there was "a stigma against sharing such personal information to people you're not really good friends with and not really close to." For instance, although Max lived in the residence halls when the deaths occurred, he did not tell his resident assistant (RA) about his death loss because he did not live near his RA and had not developed a close relationship with his RA. He said that if these death losses had occurred during his first year of college, he might have been more open to sharing this information with others. However, "I had already kind of found other people to confide in."

Max said that he was friendly with a lot of staff and faculty on his college campus and that he did notify his professors of what was going on with him just so that there would be "a second pair of eyes watching me, especially reading my stuff and grading my tests. I think that's just really helpful to have." However, he admitted: "I never really had the close, really close relationship with anybody to share that information and really talk about it. And I kind of regret not having that close of a relationship." Max's professors knew that the death losses occurred, but they never asked Max if he needed any accommodations, and he chose not to ask for any extensions.

### **Continuing his Educational Goals**

Max said that part of his drive to continue and succeed academically was to honor his lost loved ones: "Not to let them go, and not to forget them, but to enjoy them and move on." From seeing how his mother processed her grief in an unhealthy manner, emotionally, mentally, and physically, Max saw how important it was to grieve but to return to a routine. With only one

more year of college remaining, Max knew the path that he wanted for his future, and he knew that he needed to stay academically strong. Max again turned towards his lost loved one for inspiration: “I knew that my grandpa was huge into academics and being a good student, so I dedicated myself to being the best student that I could be. Not only for myself and my family but for my grandpa, and I knew that he would be proud of the work I did.” As a result, Max was able to create a routine for himself where he was able to dedicate time to specifically carve out time to dedicate to his academics, while also factoring self-care into his schedule.

### **Rokit**

Rokit was a 42-year-old male doctoral student who identified as a third-generation Mexican American. Rokit was in the seventh year of his doctoral program at a large, public institution in the West region of the United States. Rokit had previously served as a youth empowerment worker and had gone back to school so that he could one day be a professor.

Rokit had experienced multiple death losses during his lifetime, starting with the person for whom he was named, his paternal uncle who had passed away from cancer. At the age of four and a half, Rokit experienced the death loss of his father. His father died at the age of 23 due to kidney issues. As a result, Rokit and his two siblings were raised by a single mother and had grown up in a low-income, working-class home. As the oldest child, Rokit felt that he held a lot of responsibility in his family and lost a bit of his childhood under these circumstances.

During the time that he was in his doctoral program, Rokit had experienced the death loss of his paternal grandmother known as “Nana,” as well as his uncle Raymond, who was his paternal grandmother’s son. Rokit’s Nana had a heart attack and had passed away when she was 88 years old. Rokit had been close to his grandmother. Rokit said: “I lost my Nana, who was pretty much my mom. A mother figure in my life, and helped raise me and everything.” Rokit



surmised that, “I think there was always this where maybe I potentially filled a little place of losing her son, and I was kind of like the gift to her.”

Rokit’s bond with his grandmother started at an early age. Therefore anytime that Nana came around, Rokit remembered always being ready to either help or hang out with her. As Rokit grew older, he remembered his life becoming more turbulent as a teen. He spoke about a time where he was struggling, and fondly remembered how Nana was always there for him:

When everybody makes you feel like you’re the problem and you’re messing up- I’m not going to school, I’m fighting, I’m smoking, I’m drinking, you know, I’m breaking things, everything’s escalating. She was like the only one that never gave up on me. She was like if you want to leave you can come live with me.

Rokit said that it was during this time that he felt like his connection with his grandmother grew deeper and stronger.

The other death loss that Rokit experienced during his doctoral program was the death of his uncle Raymond, which happened after Nana passed. Rokit had been by his uncle Raymond’s bedside when he passed away from a systemic bronchial infection. “I remember my Nana would always say this prayer every time we would leave. She would give me a blessing and do the Lord’s Prayer or do a quick Hail Mary and stuff, so I remember being there and basically giving him the same. Like, go with God and go with your mom.” Rokit had been heavily involved in the caretaking of both his Nana and uncle Raymond, and he said that he felt a bit of release with his death losses.

Being a person of faith helped Rokit with the death losses of his family members. He felt that his Nana’s death, for example, would allow her to be in Heaven with all of her sons. He

continued to say that he was “happy that she’s free and everything and now, it’s just missing her. And of course, knowing that she misses me, that she’s with me all the time kind of thing.”

### **Shaping the Experience of College**

When Rokit started his doctoral program, he had stepped up to be his Nana’s guardian, which also meant taking care of his uncle Raymond who had a disability. As a result, Rokit’s experience as a doctoral student was profoundly shaped by the caretaker role that he took on with his family members, and there would be times when he would need to take phone calls during class from the nursing home or doctors. He had to communicate this with his professors and excuse himself.

Assuming these new responsibilities, Rokit also began to reprioritize things that mattered to him in his life. He reflected:

All I can say is just the love, the bonding, those times of being able to kind of define what your work/life balance looks like. To be there, I was 100% present. I had none of all this other pressure of am I going to get a job? Am I going to publish? All that bullshit wasn’t there. It was just us.

Outside of classes, Rokit spent the majority of his time with his Nana and uncle Raymond.

As time went by and his Nana’s health started to decline, Rokit began to feel the weight that his caregiving responsibilities began to have on him. He expressed, “that commitment, as the years moved forward, just got a bit heavier and heavier and heavier to kind of just walking with her through the process of her aging, Alzheimer’s, dementia, kind of thing.” However, as emotionally exhausting as this was for him, this experience was not new to him. Growing up without a father, Rokit felt that he served as a caregiver at an early age. “You take on these adult roles early on, these caregiving roles without really knowing that you’re being wired that way.

It's just what you do, you know? You're the son. You're going to step up and be the man of the house now and take care of those things."

Things became more challenging with Nana and uncle Raymond's housing arrangement when the woman who used to help out with household chores for Nana and uncle Raymond quit after Nana became violent in the house. Although Rokit had two siblings, they both had their own families and did not offer to help care for their grandmother. Rokit was frustrated with how his siblings were not stepping up to help with Nana and that they were expecting Rokit to take care of things since he was a single man without any children. Rokit said that he loved and honored his Nana, and that is why he was willing to do the heavy lifting, but he still struggled with how his siblings approached everything. "I don't know how to really get that value and instill that feeling into other people. What I had to learn or let go early on is that I can't put my expectation on what I think everybody needs to step to." Rokit was there for his grandmother from her care to her burial during his doctoral program. Although there were different family members and friends who came into the picture now and then, it was Rokit who was consistently there every step of the way.

### **Support Systems**

In Rokit's personal life, he was able to receive support from some elders at the sweat lodge that he frequented for community and his self-care:

When you start to be more exposed to a lot of our indigenous traditions and ceremonies, at least in my mind, you see a lot of connecting the dots. Big time. And more of a holistic type of understanding. So yeah, more lately, I've been really praying and drumming and songs, and I've been sitting in circle. That's probably another reason why I'm still here.

Participating in these ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge and engaging in circle keeping and circle work, was very helpful for Rokit.

Rokit also received support from the colleagues in his program. One way that they supported him was encouraging him to seek assistance from counseling and psychological services. They helped Rokit to normalize seeking mental health services and told him how helpful it was for them. It was this type of encouragement that helped Rokit to use these services at least once a month. Additionally, the friends that Rokit made in his doctoral program helped him in other ways. “Like they came to the funeral, they pitched in with the GoFundMe, so then after calling and checking in, let’s go meet up for lunch, let’s go here, at that time it was really cool too.”

As far as support from campus members, it took some time for Rokit to let his faculty members and administrators know what was going on with him. However, when Rokit began to feel the struggles that caregiving had on top of his academic commitments, he was able to confide in his advisor whom he fondly referred to as, Profe Dylan. Rokit expressed his special relationship with Profe Dylan:

His mentorship is on an academic but also on a personal level. He’s going to prioritize me being a human, being a person, and the things going on in my life and that loss first.

Like this quarter, after and stuff. I know you want to get on your proposal and everything like that, but he’s like, Nah. I need you to take care of yourself, go to the beach, spend

time with your family. You’re going to have this quarter, you know? You need that time.

As a result, Rokit took a couple of weeks off from his job to grieve and process everything.

When Rokit returned, Profe Dylan continued to give Rokit some grace when it came to pushing his proposal forward because, in Profe Dylan’s mind, that was not the priority at that time.

Other professors also reached out to Rokit after hearing about Rokit's death losses: "Dr. H was just like, I lost my grandma, too. And it took us a couple of months to check-in, but when we did, he was like, before we talk about anything, I want to know. You need to share with me everything." Another committee member, Dr. G, was also able to check in with Rokit as well:

And I remember one day, he was like, what's up with the writing? What's up with the writing? Man, we got to move you along. What's up with your writing? And one day he was like, hey man, you know what? Let's go get a bite. Let's go talk and get a bite. He's like man, I've been worried about you. Like I hope you don't think that me telling you, what's up with the writing is badgering. Like I talked to Dr. Dylan, you know, and it seems like you got a lot going on. That's when I kind of told him a lot more what the heavy lifting was and trying to move forward.

It was these intentional check-ins that helped Rokit to feel supported. What made the difference for him was that his professors and committee members cared about him not only in an academic sense but also on a personal level.

### **Continuing his Educational Goals**

Several factors helped Rokit to keep with his educational goals. First, Rokit mentioned that the flexibility that his graduate program offered was beneficial. "But what I can say is that being in grad school and being able to control my schedule and doing a lot of the after school programming or whatever, gave me the flexibility." For instance, there were times with school and work where he could meet with people through Skype so that he could still be there with Nana and uncle Raymond.

Profe Dylan was also a key player in helping Rokit to continue to persist academically. Rokit was able to connect with Profe Dylan on a professional level with the community work

that he was involved with, but also on a personal level, especially since Profe Dylan had gone through a similar experience with his family members. Therefore Rokit wanted to make sure that he was academically persisting and doing good work because Profe Dylan had invested so much in him: “Believing in me, and believing in the work and how important it is and the respect of my work...So I kind of think, making him proud as well. And finishing to thank him too, you know?”

Outside of academia, what motivated Rokit to persist in his program was being a mentor in a youth program. He said that having youth say things like, “When are we going to call you, doctor?” was a big motivator for him. By working with youth, Rokit said:

I got a glimpse of what it would be like to be Profe. I really got motivated by that. I started to see my little contributions in a way, to support and guide these young scholars that are doing amazing, badass things. And I kind of thought, hey, what’s stopping you from doing this full-time? Finish, fool, finish!

Therefore, Rokit got a surge of energy to push through to not only make himself proud but also to make his students proud.

Last but not least, Rokit’s drive to continue and finish his degree was for his Nana. Every time that Rokit was thinking of taking a break from school to help out his Nana and uncle Raymond, she always wanted to make sure that he was still in school. In one of our interviews, Rokit shared:

It’s been five years since she’s passed, but I can say that it’s just been a whirlwind as you can imagine. I don’t think it’s really slowed down even still, and I think that’s just because this part of my life, this chapter and being here, working my life around the

quarter system and everything moving forward hasn't closed yet. I'm hoping that when that chapter closes, it'll be a little bit more settling so I can regroup and take a breath. Months after our interview concluded, I reconnected with Rokit, and he had shared with me that he had graduated with his doctorate and had received a post-doctorate position.

### **Michelle**

Michelle was a 32-year-old woman who identified as multiracial. Michelle was a fourth-year doctoral student who attended a large public institution in the West. Although culturally identifying as Filipino and Pacific Islander, Michelle had a strong affinity to her southern American identity based on her time living in the South for her undergraduate and master's degrees. Michelle chose her current institution so that she could be around more women faculty of color and people of different ethnic and gender backgrounds. Michelle was pursuing her Ph.D. so that she could one day be a faculty researcher at a major research institution.

Michelle experienced many death losses in her life, both before and during her graduate studies. Michelle had lost five people to death during her doctoral program: Her ex-boyfriend (Joey's) paternal grandmother, her father's first wife, her friend Tyrone, Joey's brother Emilio, and her current partner's grandfather, Bernard. Although Michelle lost many people in her life during this short time, I will focus here on the death losses that she spoke the most about and were most significant to her: Tyrone, Emilio, and Bernard.

Tyrone was a close friend of Michelle's, who she had known for about 13 years. Tyrone was a special education teacher and was also the husband of Michelle's best friend. Michelle said that she often saw Tyrone like a little brother: "He was always kind of the annoying brother who would pick on me and hit me and like flick me and poke me. He just knew how to irritate me. Kind of like in the most endearing way."

Michelle had learned about Tyrone's passing when she received a phone call from his wife in the middle of the day, which was not typical. Michelle thought her friend was calling about a wedding event that they were supposed to be going to:

So I pick up the phone, and I'm like, hey, is everything okay? And it's like, pause. And she's like, 'No.' What's wrong? So I'm thinking she's going to tell me we can't go to the wedding, forgetting...like my mind is on this stupid thing. And she's like, 'Tyrone died last night.' And I'm like, who's Tyrone? It didn't even dawn on me that it could be her husband. What? What did you say? 'Tyrone died last night.' And I think I screamed, Nooooo!

Michelle explained that Tyrone had been in bed with his baby, and his wife was going to run out and get groceries. Before she left, she saw that both of them were asleep, so she left, came home, put away the groceries, and went back upstairs. By that time, she had discovered that he had already passed.

Michelle shared that Tyrone had a history of using substances, but "because he was so jovial and low key and quiet and calm, and never really violent about it, he slipped under the radar." The week before he had passed, his wife had found out that he had gotten cocaine from a friend and was high on a family trip. However, the night that Tyrone had passed, his wife had discovered a pill on the ground. She ended up looking at her husband's search history on his work laptop. After going through his Google search history, she learned that Tyrone had searched for information about fentanyl. Michelle explained that: "Fentanyl is basically this very, very deadly substance that's like 100% times more powerful than heroin." Therefore the examiner had said that Tyrone had passed away from cardiac arrest, potentially from a drug overdose.



The other significant death loss that Michelle experienced was the death loss of Joey's brother, Emilio, who she had known for about 15 years. Michelle described Emilio as being "very, very quiet. He was incredibly smart, but just very quiet and very much an observer. A really good dad." Michelle's favorite memories of Emilio were when he was with his daughters. She also loved moments when he played the protective big brother role with Joey and his career choice because he wanted him to have a good life.

Michelle mentioned that Emilio had colitis for the majority of his life. However, she described how his colitis physically transformed his body when they were in college:

He went from looking like James Van Der Beek to like Powder. He was this gorgeous, tall, blonde Aryan god-looking guy. With the colitis, he had to take steroids, and he lost his hair, he became much more paler, and he gained a bunch of weight and lost some weight, so he was all over the place. He had a drastic physical change while he was in college.

Although Emilio was used to being on a variety of medications and steroids for his colitis, he did not want to have a bag attached to him that would collect his waste. Therefore, in place of this option, Emilio had to take a specific type of medication that his doctor warned would lower his white blood cell count.

Later, Emilio had gone in for a regular checkup with his doctor, where they did blood tests on him. After running some tests, his doctor found out that Emilio did not have any white blood cells due to the medication that he was on. Emilio had to go to the hospital to undergo surgery immediately. At this time, Michelle was in graduate school in the West region of the United States. She recalled what happened after she heard the news about Emilio's zero white blood cell count: "I just leave work, basically, and I get on the next plane. I'm just crying. I'm a

mess.” When Michelle arrived and got to the hospital, she met up with the rest of Emilio’s family, and they were waiting to see if Emilio had made it through the operation. He did.

After the surgery, Emilio started to gain white blood cells again, and everyone started to feel more relieved about the situation. During this time, Michelle had been named the maid of honor for a friend’s wedding, and the bachelorette weekend was planned for later that weekend in a different state. Seeing that Emilio was on the road to recovery and everyone was no longer worried, Michelle thought it seemed safe to continue her travel plans to her friend’s bachelorette party. Therefore she packed up and drove over to the location of the bachelorette party. Unfortunately, things took a turn for the worst within the five-hour timespan that Michelle had left the hospital.

By the time she reached her friend’s bachelorette weekend party, Michelle had to turn around, look for a flight out, and head to the airport:

He had taken a turn for the much, much worse, and he had got sepsis because one of the lines that they put in, they put in backward, and they took it out. And it wasn’t, because they were trying to put in an antibacterial line, and that didn’t work out. And it’s a teaching hospital, so we think that one of the fellows that was doing it. So anyways he got sepsis, they were giving him medication for that. But the thing about that medication is that it needs white blood cells to hop on and fight the bacteria, the infection. And he didn’t have any. And then he was on dialysis, also because his kidneys were giving out.

So it was a mess.

The only thing that Michelle could think of on the plane heading back to Emilio was: “Like just hold on. Like I just want to see you, and I just want to say goodbye.” Fortunately, Michelle

arrived at the hospital and was able to be with Emilio for one more time, where she said her goodbyes.

Due to Emilio's declining health, a decision had to be made on how to proceed.

Therefore Emilio's wife made the decision:

It was either the medication was going to kill him because of how potent it was, or they took him off the medication, and the sepsis was. He was eventually going to succumb to that. The medication was also destroying his organs, so even if he did make it, his organs would have just been demolished, so she made the call. And it was a very, like I can't do this day. This is the first time I'm having to recount this out loud, by the way. And the first time that I'm not crying, so it's very weird. I remember we were all just sitting there and waiting for [his wife] to make a decision. And once she made a decision, we were like, okay. And we were all able to say goodbye. So everybody went to see him. I went to see him. And I was a blubbering mess. I didn't even, I was just like, thank you for everything. Because we knew at that time that he was still conscious. The girls, she never brought the girls to see him. They never came to the hospital to see him at all. But she would bring him videos and play it for him, and she said that when she played it for him, that she would see tears roll down his eye, so she knew that he was still there. And it was really hard because before he went under, [his wife] had asked him if he was scared and he said he was. So it was very, very clear that he wasn't, you know, he wasn't ready to go. Which kind of like, it makes me mad when I think about it. He had so much that he wanted to live for, and he was fighting to live for.

Michelle continued to recall that the goodbyes were awful and how that moment was probably one of the worst experiences that she has had in her life. Michelle noted that “Emilio’s death was a very life-changing kind of like moment for me.”

When Emilio had passed away, Michelle said that she was the person who went to pick up the plastic bag of clothes that he had been wearing when he checked into the hospital. She remembers looking into the bag of Emilio’s belongings. It was at that moment that she recognized the clothes in the bag. Specifically, it was a sweater that she had given Emilio, and it had become one of his favorite sweaters. Michelle remembers staring at that sweater in disbelief, knowing that the person who used to embody those clothes would never wear them again.

The third significant death loss that Michelle experienced was the death loss of her current partner’s grandfather, Bernard. Michelle had known her partner for over a decade, and she had become very close to his family. Bernard had treated Michelle like one of his grandchildren. Having never known any of her grandfathers, Michelle thought it was so special that Bernard saw her as his granddaughter and treated her like a part of the family.

Bernard was a professor and she wanted to follow in his footsteps. Michelle looked up to him in a lot of ways:

He was an immigrant. He immigrated here but under the circumstances of the Iran revolution. Yeah, he was really inspiring, a really cool guy who lived a very interesting life. And he was such a central figure in the family. It felt like his loss, the impact was so much greater in a lot of ways.

Some of Michelle’s favorite memories of Bernard were times when they would have meals together as a family and how Bernard would point out that they were the only people of color at the dining table.

Although Bernard's mind remained sharp, his body started to deteriorate, and he became sick: "It was kind of like a bummer, but he...it felt okay too because he was very old and very tired, and looking back on his life, he had lived a very big life." Michelle and her partner planned an extended trip to see Bernard with the rest of the family, with what Michelle referred to as a "late vigil, or whatever when someone is dying, and you're there all the time because you're just kind of waiting for that moment." So his place was packed with his four children, their children, and extended family members. Bernard wanted to live naturally and did not want to prolong his life by being put on life support. In his own way, Bernard was able to say his goodbyes to each of his loved ones. According to Michelle, "I was also very close to him, but in a way, it was like the death of my father, where it felt complete. Like the cycle was complete." To Michelle, this meant that they had a full life and a satisfying life.

Bernard passed away in April, which Michelle thought was fitting because he had been such an avid gardener. After Bernard passed away, Michelle said that she began to look through old pictures:

You can look back at the pictures in their life and feel at peace and be like this really sucks that we can't keep them around for longer because there's so many more years that I'm going to be alive that they don't get to be a part of, but at the same time, look at all the years that they were around and I wasn't, and they lived such an amazing life. So it just feels complete and done, and it's a cycle.

Therefore the photographs helped Michelle after Bernard died. Again, due to his love for gardening, she is still reminded of him whenever she sees flowers.

## Shaping the Experience of College

Pre and post-death losses, Michelle was continually traveling back and forth to be with her family and friends. Being in the West region of the United States for school when her family and friends were either in the East or in the South made things difficult, but Michelle made it work. It did, however, create some friction with professors due to her absences. Michelle recalled how she had to be in Washington, D.C., for an academic presentation. She was trying to balance that commitment and support her friend who had just lost her husband: “But at the same time, it was two types of important in my life. And I was like, I can manage. I can do this, guys! And they were like, well you just disappeared. They never said that you know, but it felt like they were more concerned with that.”

In addition to being pulled in different directions for personal and academic priorities, Michelle also wrestled with the emotional baggage that came with these death losses. Michelle explained that when this topic comes up unexpectedly, it is often a lot for her: “Like I’m not ready for my whole day to be like pulled from underneath me.” Michelle shared an example where every year on her birthday, Facebook will share an old video with her that included Emilio wishing her a happy birthday with his daughters, and “every year when that video comes up, I can’t bear to see that part.”

Although Michelle is now able to talk about her death losses without crying, she still has a lot of feelings about how her loved ones died, especially since they left behind their partners and young children:

I don’t want to say unfair as if there’s like a fair way for someone to go because there are a lot of people, even old people dying isn’t fair, you know? But it’s kind of like some people would call it untimely, but almost it’s like tragic. Tragic in the sense that they

have little children and they don't get to see like this full cycle of life come to fruition like all other people in this category.

It was hard for her to comprehend that Emilio and Tyrone would not be able to spend more time with their children, and these young children were going to grow up without their fathers around. Specifically thinking about Emilio, Michelle said:

I think I still feel a tinge of anger, and I don't know who or what I'm angry at. I'm just mad that he's not around. You know when your sadness turns to anger, I'm so, so, so sad that I'm angry. And when I see [his two daughters] growing up, and I talk to [his wife], I just get so upset because he was an amazing dad.

The sadness and anger that Michelle immediately felt after the death losses soon turned into a fear that she was going to lose people who she cared about the most. This fear began a ripple effect that eventually impacted her personal and academic life.

Based on the number of significant death losses that Michelle experienced, she explained how worried she became when she would text people and not hear back from them for a while. When this would happen, Michelle began to think that the worst had happened: "So I'm like, just so you know when you don't answer my text, I think you're in a ditch somewhere." Michelle disclosed that she now had a genuine fear that she would lose people close in her life. As a result, one of the most significant ways that the death loss shaped her college experience was that she ended her long-time relationship with her partner, Joey:

And part of the reason [I broke up with Joey] was because he started not getting sick, but he like, he started feeling pains in his chest, and he was living in Vegas, so we were long distance. And that triggered something in me, and I was like, I couldn't sleep. I was horrified that something was going to happen to him. And I remember telling him I can

live without you just fine. I cannot live in a world without you in it. And he wasn't taking it seriously. And I think that sent me into this craziness of we can't be together.

Since Michelle had been with Joey for over a decade, her breakup greatly impacted how she was showing up in class, and her academics severely declined. Although she could get dressed and attended school every day, Michelle would go home, close the blinds and sometimes sleep for about 18 hours:

The subsequent things that happened as a result of that, like ending my very, very long relationship with [my ex] that affected my grades. Like I almost failed a class. But that was kind of the domino that knocked that domino over, you know? So yeah, that was really, really difficult academically after that breakup.

These events propelled Michelle to start seeing a campus therapist regularly.

### **Support Systems**

Michelle was very selective in whom she confided in about the death losses and how these events were impacting her. Besides her therapist and the people who she was closest to, Michelle chose not to share this information with others if she did not have to. She explained: “a part of me is like death is sacred and the last dying moments can be dignifying. Just because you're vulnerable in that situation, and I just can't imagine being in that place.” She added to this by saying:

Part of the reason I never talked to anybody was that I [have] never known anybody who experienced such an odd thing in their life. And I couldn't find comfort. I didn't think I could find comfort talking to people just to talk about it. I didn't want to just tell people about it. Because I think sometimes death has this way of, especially with sudden deaths, I experienced this with Tyrone, people start to be a little voyeuristic, and I started to feel



icky. So I became very protective with that kind of thing too. Yeah, so I didn't talk to anyone except [my ex]. And I went to counseling, and I learned how that affected me.

But other than that, I haven't really talked to anybody about this other than my therapist. Although people like her siblings knew what had happened, Michelle told me that she disclosed more information to me than she had with other people who she knew because she values and believes in the importance of research:

Like you probably got more out of me. And I do it because I'm a researcher, so I know it's important. [You got more] than what anyone would get out of me on a very personal level. Just because I really, really, protect that memory and that moment. I tell some people, the people that I am closest to, so they know. But I don't just like tell anybody.

Not even my first layer of friends. Like my inner layer know because they were there, but like my first layer of friends, I don't talk to them about that.

Michelle further explained that she carefully chose who she disclosed this information with because, "I want to protect the people that I love from that exposure and vulnerability, even though they have passed." As a result, Michelle was able to talk about her death loss experiences primarily with her therapist and the people who also experienced that same death loss, because of that shared experience. She did not fully disclose all the details to her family members or what she referred to as her first layer of friends. Michelle said: "I do feel like I am part of a very strong network of people in my life, like a village of people who even when they complain that they think I'm a little too private, like you just never tell us anything, even when they feel like I'm not sharing anything, they still try to be sensitive to what I need and what I could need."

As mentioned earlier, Michelle made the conscious decision to use counseling and psychological services on her campus after the death losses when it started to impact her

relationship and her academics. “[B]reaking up with [Joey] felt like such a significant loss that I needed help. So I started counseling, and counseling is when I realized how much Emilio’s death affected me. Because up until this time, I had never talked to anyone about it.” Michelle continued by saying, “it was in counseling where I realized, oh my gosh. I had carried Emilio’s death with me for over a year and a half, and I never talked to anyone about it, or like even reflected or thought about it.” Although Michelle had to try a few therapists, she was able to connect with a therapist who was a woman of color who was able to speak a common language that made sense to her:

She knows how to talk to me in terms of being a grad student, being a researcher. So she just like, she hits me with research. She hits me with empirical data. She has a Ph.D. So she has gone through, so that, but also she understands I think like critically what I look at in terms of race, gender, and class and so it’s a lot easier to talk to her because we have the same arsenal of language or vocabulary and concepts and stuff.

Michelle credited her therapist with being able to participate in this study and open up about her death loss experiences without being “a blubbing mess.” Michelle only wishes that she “didn’t wait until something went horribly wrong in my life.”

Within academic spaces, Michelle made a conscious decision not to disclose the death losses to her faculty members unless it was necessary. Michelle did disclose her circumstances to one faculty member because she was scheduled to fly to the East coast for an academic presentation. However, around that time she had flown out to support her friend, who had just lost her husband. Unfortunately, that particular faculty member was more concerned about the presentation than they were for what Michelle was going through:

[They were] not quite as supportive, and I think part of that is because we had a very high stakes talk at DC that I had to give, and they were more concerned about me doing a good job of the talk than my well-being at the time. So yeah, it wasn't, they were supportive enough, but working out my schedule and switching flights and stuff, yeah, they were like when are you going to get to DC? And I'm like when I'm done figuring out what else I can do for my friend who just lost her husband and has a one-year-old.

Like, I had to be there to help take care of the baby. I'm sure this talk can wait.

Although Michelle did not feel fully supported by this faculty member, she did share a story about another faculty member who she had a positive interaction with who helped her to persist academically.

After Emilio's death loss, Michelle ended her relationship with Joey, which resulted in her performing poorly in her Gender Studies class. However, Michelle approached her professor and informed her what she had been going through with her breakup. Michelle mentioned that although she would attend and participate in class every day, she would go home and sleep for hours. After hearing this, her professor was empathetic and understood how this could impact her performance:

Yeah, so she was like, take the final, and that will be your final grade. It just goes to show you. Faculty have so much power. Literally, she could have been like, don't even do the final, I'm just going to give you an A, you know? She could have done anything. She could have said, nope, you get a zero. You're failing. She could have done a number of those things, and she chose that, and it made all the difference. Because had I actually failed that class, I wouldn't have qualified if I had gotten a zero in that class. What was

important to her was that I actually knew the content and proved it, and I was able to somehow, and she was like, okay. You're fine.

As someone who aspires to be a faculty member one day, she said that she now tries to exercise that style of grace, understanding, and compassion in the leadership positions that she holds.

### **Continuing her Educational Goals**

Although Michelle and Joey are no longer together, Michelle credits him with providing her with a lot of the initial momentum to continue with her studies. Michelle said that Joey had been one of her biggest supporters, so much that "I could have said I want to sell popsicles for a living and he'd be like, 'Great! Let's build you a stand.' And he was extremely supportive, and when I said I wanted to get my Ph.D., he was on board." Joey never lost focus of Michelle and what her goals were for this doctoral degree. Michelle said, "He was a really big part of getting me started and getting me going and that whole thing."

After Emilio's death, Michelle said that she approached life with a new lens and with a different type of motivation: "Just seeing how quickly life cannot be life anymore was very shocking, living life with a purpose and that purpose being trying to make life a little bit easier for others who don't have as much privilege or access to the privileges of the world." Therefore, she had a new drive not only to finish her doctorate but also had a new outlook on how to live her life differently:

Yeah, so I think it just really enforced my commitment. Just to do my best every day and seeing this whole degree through. But also in a paradoxical way, there's also so much more to life than just getting a Ph.D., so I just have to remember that because sometimes you get caught in this whole, oh my gosh, what if I don't get this? It's like, chill out. Life is very, very short and there's so many things that you can do, and a lot of these things

are inconsequential to you and your happiness. So it's like a paradox in that way. And there's so much beauty in this life that this Ph.D. is not going to determine how great my life is going to be and the great, important work that I can do and change, and the effects I can have and the change that I can affect. So, yeah. I think in a very weird way, it makes you think about those two things right next to each other, which makes life more challenging some days and a lot easier on other days, depending on which side of the coin you're looking at.

In addition to Michelle's reflection on how she wanted to finish her doctoral degree and live her life, she also shared that her family was also another significant motivating factor for her. She said that she was getting her degree so that her family would have a better life.

### **Summary**

The profiles of the seven research participants, two undergraduate students, and five graduate students, were presented in this chapter. Each participant shared their unique death loss experiences and how these events shaped their college experience. Participants reflected on how they believed they were able to continue with their educational goals after their death loss experience, which included discussing their various support systems and motivation for continuing with their studies. In Chapter V, I present the findings from this study through composite narratives.

## CHAPTER V. COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

The research question that guided this study was: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity? Counter-storytelling was the method I used as inspiration when responding to this question within this chapter. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). Grounded in real-life experiences, counter-storytelling “can be presented in the form of a composite narrative in which the author uses a variety of data sources that when combined tell the experiences of marginalized communities” (Patton & Catching, 2009, p. 716).

Counter-storytelling is rooted in Critical Race Theory. However, my research was designed using a constructivist paradigm and did not center on race and racism. Therefore, my participants’ identities and experiences as bereaved college students should not be compared to the experiences of individuals who have been marginalized and oppressed by society based on their race. However, I appreciated that the counter-storytelling method is useful in elucidating the experiences of outgroups whose stories are not often told.

Although bereaved students are not a marginalized community in the traditional sense, they are not consciously considered in many policies and practices. After reviewing the literature on bereaved college students, I noticed that scholars tended to focus on the challenges that bereaved college students encountered. Consequently, the educational resilience of bereaved college students is often shadowed or overlooked within scholarly publications. Therefore, the spirit of counter-storytelling informed how I approached this chapter. Sharing my participant’s experiences surrounding educational resilience allowed me to challenge the dominant narrative that bereaved college students only experience a decline in their educational performance.

Once the data from the seven research participants were compiled, examined, and analyzed, I created four composite characters who engaged in conversations at a monthly Death Café. It was through the monthly Death Café meetings that key findings from this research are presented.

As Schaafsma and Vinz (2011) mentioned, to narrate is more than just giving an account or telling a story. Narrative strategies help to craft and shape experiences. Therefore in this chapter, findings from this research are presented in a script format. “Scripts are implicit shared orientations that organize people’s perceptions and actions, because they are the naturalized interpretations of events, constructed over time as people explain to each other ‘what happened’ and ‘why it’s important to discuss’” (Daiute, 2014, p. 142). The gender ratio of the composite characters was similar to the seven participants who participated in this research study. Real experiences are incorporated into this chapter, along with some direct quotes from participants. Since I used a script format in this chapter, APA guidelines were not followed.

The four composite characters in the script convene at a Death Café that is hosted at a campus café. This Death Café was organized for college students to discuss death, dying, and bereavement while enjoying refreshments in a warm and inviting environment. Five Death Café meetings take place from February to June. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identified, researchers sometimes struggle to “express one’s own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to tell of the participants’ storied experiences and to represent their voices, all the while attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience’s voices” (p. 147). Therefore, each meeting concludes with the facilitator of the Death Café, Olivia, reflecting on the Death Café meeting with her dog, Muffin. These reflections are inspired by reactions that I had throughout the research process that I noted in my reflection journal.

Table 2

*Character Demographic Background*

Name	Classification	Gender Pronouns	Deceased	Cause
Leo	Master's/doctoral	He/him/his	Uncle	Drug overdose
Olivia	Facilitator	She/her/hers	Roommate	Brain tumor
Pepper	Undergraduate	She/they	Grandfather	Natural
Quinn	Doctoral candidate	She/her/hers	Friend	Homicide
Sara	Master's	She/her/hers	Brother	Cancer

**Death Café Meeting #1:****Relationships Are Not Always As They Seem**

**AFTERNOON AT THE CAMPUS CAFÉ.** *It is 4:47 pm on a cold, gray, February afternoon.*

*From the inside of the café, you can see that it has started to rain outside. A mixture of jazz music and muffled conversations fill the air. Toward the back of the café, there is a private room with large, floor to ceiling windows. Inside this room, chairs are formed in a circle. Olivia is arranging a plate of cookies next to the welcoming table. Olivia has participated in Death Cafés before, but this is the first time that she is facilitating a Death Café specifically for college students. Fanning out some napkins near the cookies, Olivia sighs out loud. “I hope this rain doesn’t prevent people from showing up.” Olivia then walks over and straightens out her contact information sheet and name tags. As she begins to fill out her name tag, in walks the first student.*

**LEO:** Excuse me. Hi. Is this for the Death Café?

**OLIVIA:** Yes! You’ve come to the right place. Hi, I’m Olivia. *Olivia extends her hands out and shakes Leo’s hand.*



**LEO:** I'm Leo.

**OLIVIA:** Hi, Leo. Great to have you today. Please feel free to write your name on one of the name tags and help yourself to some cookies. We won't start for another 10 minutes or so. Feel free to purchase some coffee or tea at the café if you'd like something to warm yourself up.

**LEO:** Thanks. I think I'll go ahead and do that.

*As Leo starts to fill out his name tag, Olivia turns around and has a big smile on her face. She is relieved that someone has shown up. Leo makes his way to the café counter to order his beverage and more people, wet from the rain, enter the café and find their way to the back room where Olivia greets them. There are now four participants in the room. It is 5:03 pm.*

**Olivia:** Good afternoon, everyone. Please help yourself to some cookies in the back. There are some vegan and gluten-free options! We will get started in a few minutes.

*A few minutes pass, and people start making their way back to the circle. Olivia continues.*

**Olivia:** Thank you all for coming today. My name is Olivia, and I've been attending Death Cafés for the past four years. As some of you may know, this is the first Death Café for college students on this campus, so thank you all for coming today.

*Olivia pauses and gives a warm and welcoming smile.*

**Olivia:** Just so we can see who is in the room, please raise your hand if this is the first time that you've attended a Death Café.

*Olivia scans the room and sees all four participants raise their hands.*

**Olivia:** Wonderful. All first-time participants! Thank you for being here today. *Olivia takes a brief pause.* Death Cafés have been around for a little over a decade. It's not necessarily a grief or counseling group, but rather a discussion group where people come to talk about death-related topics. But don't worry. If issues of grief or counseling come up, that's welcome too! As the facilitator of this Death Café, I'll let the group guide where the conversation goes. Although there may be tears in these spaces, in my experience, there is often a lot of laughter, too! *Olivia smiles.* As far as ground rules, they are pretty simple. This is a space where everyone should respect one another, their belief systems, and their diverse viewpoints. Also, we are fortunate that the owners of the café are letting us use this room free of charge, so please feel free to support them when you can. Lastly, restrooms are also located around the corner. Do you all have any questions at this time?

*Ten seconds pass, and the room is silent.*

**Olivia:** Alright, then. Our format for today will begin with having a one minute of silence to honor those that we have lost in our lives. We'll then do some introductions and see where the conversation leads us. As we approach the end of our time, I'll provide an opportunity for those who may not have had a chance to chat to do so, but no pressure at all. After that, we'll close out by saying one word that summarizes how we are feeling. Does that sound okay?

*Everyone in the circle nods their heads in approval. Seeing that nonverbal cue, Olivia takes out her cellphone and sets her timer for one minute. Besides hearing a soft buzzing sound coming from the room, everyone in the room is silent. As one person begins to shift in their seat, the cell phone alarm goes off.*

**Olivia:** Thank you for engaging in the moment of silence. We'll now go ahead and get started with some introductions. *Olivia clears her throat.* Again, my name is Olivia. She/her/hers. I graduated about four years ago with a master's in communication studies and have stuck around the area to do some freelancing. I started getting involved in Death Cafés when my college roommate died due to health reasons. My roommate's death greatly impacted me during my last year in my program. That's when I first started seeing a campus counselor who told me about Death Cafés and where I could attend them. And you know, going to Death Cafés have become very meaningful for me, to be around others who have shared similar experiences and aren't afraid of talking about death. I've gained a lot from being a part of these spaces, and I wanted to create this type of community specifically for college students because I know that I could have benefited from being around peers when I lost my roommate. *Olivia takes a long exhale.* Well, that's a little bit about me and what brought me here. Now, I want to provide some space for you all to introduce yourselves and tell us about what brings you here. Let's start to my right.

*Olivia turns her body to the right, and all eyes shift to the person sitting next to her.*

**Pepper:** Hi. My name is Pepper. She and they. I'm currently a junior studying Women and Gender Studies. *Pepper's eyes begin to water. Trying to hold back from crying, Pepper continues in a quivering voice.* I'm here because my grandfather, who was like my father, passed away about a month ago. He was old, but he was always really healthy, so it took all of us by surprise. I saw a flyer on campus about this group and thought I would check it out.

**Leo:** *Leo sips, then puts down his coffee cup.* Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Leo. He/him/his. I'm in a dual masters/Ph.D. program in the college of education. I was nervous about coming here today because I've never really discussed these types of things with others before. A lot of

people have died since I started this program. However, I'm here because I recently lost my uncle due to a drug overdose. I'm handling things well, but my father isn't. That was his brother. So I guess I just wanted to see what this was all about.

**Quinn:** Hi. My name is Quinn. I use she/her/hers for my pronouns, and I am a doctoral student in Psychology. I'm here because I lost my good childhood friend a few years ago. She was walking across the road in a crosswalk when a car ran a red light and killed her. It was a hit and run. Wow! I can't believe I'm not crying when I'm saying this. Therapy must be helping! *Quinn nervously laughs.* My friend and I were so close even though she and her family had moved to Australia. We used to chat all the time. So it's been hard. That's why I'm here. *Quinn nods her head and turns to the last student in the room.*

**Sara:** I'm Sara. I'm a first-year master's student in the MBA, Master of Business Administration program. She/her/hers. I'm here because I lost my brother. I was his primary caretaker, so I've been through almost every emotion out there from the time he was sick until he died. I'm here because I thought I owed it to myself to talk to others with what I've been going through. And to be honest, I'm glad to see so many brown faces here. Because we don't talk about these types of things in other circles, you know? *Pepper and Leo, the other students of color in the room, nod their heads in agreement.* This is not just a topic that comes up in everyday conversation, and when I've started talking about my brother's death with other people, they don't know how to respond to me. They just pity me, which is not what I'm looking for, so that's why I'm here.

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone, for sharing. Now that we've all done a round of introductions and have heard from one another what brought everyone here, I'll open it up to the group to see what you want to discuss today.

*Olivia calmly picks up her beverage that she had purchased earlier from the café and leans back in her chair. Participants' eyes dart back and forth to see who will be the first one to say something.*

**Leo:** *Leo leans forward in his seat.* I can start. I guess something that I've been thinking about is how death has changed things for my family. Like, my dad has not been the same since my uncle, his brother, died from a drug overdose. And it's been tough to see him like this, you know? My dad's picked up some bad habits along the way. He's gained a lot of weight and seems to be depressed, but he won't see or talk to anyone about it. I don't know. *Pause.* You see, my uncle had previously been diagnosed with cancer, and he was in a lot of pain. He ended up getting addicted to drugs to curb his pain, and he accidentally overdosed. *Leo pauses.* When he died, I felt sad that he was gone but also relieved because he could finally be at peace and not suffer anymore. I'm a man of faith, and I just knew that he was going to be okay, you know? But for my father, it just broke him. He and my uncle were really close. So my uncle's death has altered how my dad shows up now, even our family dynamics. It just seems to be a part of our family's narrative now.

**Pepper:** It's hard for me to open up sometimes because everything still seems so fresh, but I can relate to what Leo shared, in terms of death becoming a part of his family's narrative. After my grandpa, "Pop," died, death continues to be on my family's mind. *Pepper's eyes start to water.* You know, even though Pop was technically my grandfather, he was really like a father to my younger brother and myself. *Pause. Tears start to roll down Pepper's cheeks.* My biological father left us when we were really young. I was four years old, and my brother was two. His absence impacted my mother, and she took her life shortly after, so my brother and I ended up

living with our grandparents, my mom's parents. So death has always been a part of my family's narrative. So losing Pop is a big deal, because he wasn't just a grandfather that I saw once in a while. He was my father, and he helped to raise us. People don't get that. They don't know what I've gone through and what Pop means to me. They brush it off like I shouldn't be making such a big deal about it. Especially, White people. Ugh. No offense, but they don't understand that family structures are different among people of color and that our extended family, heck, even people not related by blood, can be close to us, maybe even closer than biological family. *Pause.* So now, it's just my brother, my grandmother "Ma," and I and we're trying to navigate life without Pop.

*The room is silent. The soft buzzing sound from the room can still be heard.*

**Quinn:** *Takes a deep breath and looks at Pepper.* Thanks for sharing, Pepper. I can kind of relate to what you were saying about people not understanding our connections to those we've lost. I mean, so many people, including my own family, don't know why losing my friend, Candy, impacted me so much, especially since she hasn't lived in this country for a few years now. But what people don't understand is that Candy and I hung out all the time growing up, and we were each other's best friend. As an only child, Candy was always like a sister to me. We both had dimples on our left cheeks, so one of my favorite things that we would do when we were younger was tell people that we were sisters. *Quinn begins to giggle.* But you see, I'm White, and Candy was Asian. And besides that dimple, we didn't look anything alike. *Others around the circle start to chuckle.* But we would always make up these intricate stories to strangers of how we were both sisters. We were so foolish back then, but those are some of my favorite memories, you know? Even when we grew older, and Candy left with her family for Australia, she and I

would catch up online and update each other about our lives. She knew more things about me than any of my other friends here because we had that history, and we had that connection. Like I said, she was like a sister to me.

*Heads nod around the circle in affirmation. A minute passes by in silence, followed by a discussion on what it is like to have someone die before what it typically expected. After waiting for others to speak, Sara shifts in her chair and takes in a deep breath.*

**Sara:** My brother, Lucas, died when he was fifteen years old. When he died, people would always say what a great sister I was to him. However, I was more than that, you know? I was also his caretaker. With our ten year age gap, I was the one that raised him and took care of him for most of my life. I was the one who made his meals, walked him to school, and checked on his homework. My mom is a single parent and works at multiple jobs, so she's hardly home. I have an older brother, but he lives in another state and has his own family, so he's out of the picture. So I was the one who was always with my brother. When he was diagnosed with cancer, I was the one who had to take him to his doctor's appointments and comfort him after his treatments. I was also the one who cleaned up after him when he was incontinent. You know, it wasn't a burden to do all that. Because he's my brother, and I loved him and would do anything for him. *Tears start to form in Sara's eyes.* But you know, it was tough taking all that on. Balancing that on top of school and life, you know? Like really, really tough.

**Quinn:** I'm sorry to hear about your brother, Sara. But, yes. I don't think anyone, our classmates or professors, understands what we are really going through, you know? How much we are dealing with, on top of everything that's asked of us as students.

**Sara.** Yeah. People can be so wrapped up in their own lives that they don't even know what's going on with others. I was with my mother in the hospital when my brother died on April 20th. At first, I didn't realize it was 4/20, you know, the day when everyone smokes weed. However later that day, I went back to my residence hall to collect some items from my room, and it seemed like everyone on campus was having fun and getting high. I just felt so angry. Like, everyone's enjoying the day and blasting their music without a care in the world. And there I was trying to deal with this pain and loss that I had never felt before. I remember looking at the photo on my desk of Lucas, my brother. Thankfully my roommate wasn't there, because I just broke down and cried because it finally hit me that I would never see him again. At least not in this physical world. *Pause.* And what made it worse is that week, a lot of papers were due, and I totally blew those off. They just seemed so trivial in comparison to what had just happened.

**Leo:** Did you end up telling any of your faculty members what had happened?

**Sara:** No. Even though our classes are relatively small for my MBA program, I wasn't close to them like that, and I don't think they would have understood anyway. I didn't end up doing well in that class. But it is what it is. Now I have to work that much harder. *Sara takes a deep breath.* It's so weird. Now, of all days, every 4/20, I'm reminded of my brother's death day. And I know this may sound weird, but his death anniversary brings back all those feelings and memories as if it were yesterday.

**Olivia:** I totally get it. When I first met my roommate, Sachi, she shared with me that she had a brain tumor, so I always knew that she was sick. But during my final year in my master's program, Sachi ended up dying during spring break when she was visiting her family in Seattle. I ended up finding this out from her mother, who called me to let me know. And I didn't find this



out until later, but I learned that Sachi ended up dying on my 23rd birthday. So now, every year on my birthday, I think about Sachi. I know that this may sound a bit cheesy, but the fact that I get to live another year on her death day makes me want to live my life to the fullest. I learned from Sachi that life is just way too short. That's why I try to make sure that I spend quality time with my loved ones as much as possible and not take the time I have with them for granted.

*Heads nodded around the circle. Olivia peers up at the wall clock.*

**Olivia:** Wow, the time has just flown by! Okay, I want to be mindful of everyone's time. It's about 5:50 pm. As we start to wrap up today's conversation, I would like to open up the space for anyone that did not have a chance to say something that they wanted to.

*Everyone's eyes scroll left to right and right to left, to see if anyone is going to talk. Five seconds pass by, and no one says anything. Pepper inhales.*

**Pepper:** I have something to say. I was going back and forth of whether or not I wanted to come here tonight. I feared that this space might open up a lot of unwanted feelings and put me in a bad headspace. I know I still got emotional when talking about Pop, but I'm glad that I decided to come today. You know, close friends can comfort me, but they don't always know what I've experienced because they haven't lost anyone close to them yet. So I'm really thankful that this group is here.

**Quinn:** Yeah. I mean, it's so great that this is the first time that most of us are all meeting, and we were able to share such deep and personal things about ourselves. So thank you all.

**Leo:** It's shitty to know we've all lost people that were close to us, but it's also good to see that we're not alone on this campus. *Everyone around the room nods their heads.*

**Olivia:** Thank you. Anyone else? *Heads shake their heads no.* Okay. We'll go ahead and close out the group by going around the circle and saying one word that summarizes how you're feeling at the moment. Would anyone like to volunteer? *Leo raises his hand.*

**Leo:** Connected. *Smiles. Leo looks towards Pepper.*

**Quinn:** Grateful.

**Sara:** Lighter.

**Pepper:** Braver.

**Olivia:** Honored. *Pauses.* Alright. Well, again. Thank you for coming. I'll be hosting these Death Cafés for the remainder of the academic year. I'll keep it at the same time, same place, the first Thursday of the month. If you would like to be on the listserv to be emailed the upcoming meeting information, please don't forget to write down your contact information on the clipboard. And please finish the cookies and take some with you!

**OLIVIA'S APARTMENT:** *Sitting on the couch, Olivia has her legs extended, and her dog, Muffin, rests her head on Olivia's thigh.*

**Olivia:** Hey, good girl. What a day! Four students came today, and three of them were grad students. Can you believe it? *Muffin tilts her head to the right. Olivia pets Muffin behind the ears, and Muffin begins to thump her legs in approval.* Their loved ones all died in such different

ways, but what's even more interesting is that for many of them, the title of their relationship didn't exactly match the true relationship that they had with their loved one. Does that make sense?

*Muffin rolls over on her back and paws at Olivia.*

**Olivia:** It just makes me think that titles don't do the relationship justice, you know? *Olivia starts to rub Muffin's belly.* Is there a word in the English dictionary for that?

*With her left hand rubbing Muffin's belly, Olivia uses her right hand to Google on her phone "Relationship Not Correctly Defined" on her phone. Olivia scrolls through what was generated. Nope. Scroll. Nope. Scroll. Nope. Olivia puts down her cell phone.*

**Olivia:** Oh well. I guess Google doesn't know either! I mean, titles help people to make sense of the world, but it doesn't always convey the depth of relationship that one has. For instance, there were so many people at the Death Café who lost someone who played a significant role in their lives, but you wouldn't know how close they were based on their titles. For instance, Pepper lost their grandfather, but in reality, their grandfather was their father figure. And some people may be dismissive of the passing of one's grandfather because grandparents are typically older, and death is more likely as you age. Also, in western cultures, grandparents don't usually live in the same household as their grandchildren. But this assumption doesn't hold for everyone's experience, you know?

*Muffin sits up again and looks up at Olivia.*

**Olivia:** Ugh. That would be so frustrating if people didn't recognize and understand the true emotional weight of that death loss. I mean, if that happened to me, I know I would have the urge to explain to others the significance of that death loss. You know, to educate others, especially if they questioned why I was handling the death loss so hard. But I know that would be so exhausting.

*Muffin jumps off the couch, searches through her pile of toys, and finally finds her favorite chew stick to start gnawing on.*

**Olivia:** Hey, Muffin. You know what? With society, in general, being so strict about titles, I'm sure this type of title-not-matching the relationship scenario must come up in so many areas, whether it's visits at the hospital, or traveling in the airport for bereavement flights and airfare discounts. Even when insurance policies on things like concert tickets have specific stipulations nowadays about deaths and your relationship to the person. It's sad that sometimes you need to jump through so many hoops to legitimize your relationship if the title doesn't "fit," you know?

*Muffin stops chewing on her stick and turns her head towards Olivia.*

**Olivia:** Alright, Muffin. It looks like the rain has eased up for a bit. Want to go for a walk?

*Muffin jumps up and twirls around excitedly. Olivia clips Muffin's leash around her collar, and they both head out for their evening walk.*

**Death Café Meeting #2:****Distance and Finances**

**AFTERNOON AT THE CAMPUS CAFÉ.** *It is March, and the Death Café is starting in 5 minutes. Olivia cuts into the vanilla cake that she has brought in for the group. The same faces from last month begin to come in, one by one, with their beverages that they have ordered from the café.*

**Olivia:** Hello, everyone. It's so good to see you all again! Please be sure to fill out a name tag, and please help yourselves to some vanilla cake. We'll get started shortly.

*Pepper, Leo, Quinn, and Sara get up to make their name tags and help themselves to a slice of cake. As everyone finds their way back to their chairs, Olivia begins to talk.*

**Olivia:** Alright. It's nice to see everyone again. Since everyone has been here before, if it's okay with you all, I won't go over the purpose of Death Cafés or the ground rules unless someone new joins us again. Does that work for everyone?

**Leo:** Yup.

*Everyone else nods in agreement.*

**Olivia:** Fantastic. The agenda for today is the same as the last time we met. We'll start with a minute of silence. We'll then go around and do introductions and open the space up for discussion. As we near the end of our time together, I'll create space for any last comments, and then we'll close out with a word that sums up how we are currently feeling.

*Olivia sets her alarm on her cell phone for 1 minute. As participants get comfortable in their chairs, muffled conversations from outside the room can be heard, but not deciphered. Olivia's phone starts beeping to notify that time is up.*

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone. So for our introductions today, I thought that we could re-introduce ourselves to one another and share anything that's come up for you since we last met. Would anyone like to start?

**Sara:** I can start. Sara. I've thought a lot about our first gathering. I mean, we all came together as strangers and shared some personal things about ourselves, things that I don't even share with some of my friends here on campus. I just thought that was great. That we were able to create this space and be vulnerable with one another to have these types of conversations. Other than that, things at school continue to be hectic. I'm falling behind in some assignments. However, I'm fortunate that my cohort has been supportive. They have been helping me to catch up on notes, and they've been really good about inviting me to eat with them. That's been helpful.

**Quinn:** Quinn. Nothing's come up for me since we last met. I think school has been so busy that I've just been putting all my energy into my studies. In all honesty, this is the most progress that I've made on my dissertation in a long time. Come to think of it, after Candy passed away, I've just thrown myself into my studies. In a way, it's been a good distraction, I guess. Other than that, I've been good. *Quinn turns towards Leo.*

**Leo:** Leo. Glad to be back. I know that we have only met one other time, but attending last month's meeting helped me to feel more connected on campus. I don't live in campus housing or anything, so I usually don't stick around for anything besides classes. So it was nice to meet you

all and hear your stories. As far as school, I'll admit that I've fallen behind a bit. It's hard to see the rest of my cohort progressing when I've been in the same place for a while, you know? But other than that, things are okay.

**Olivia:** Olivia. Since we last met, I think something that came up for me was how each one of our stories were so different, and yet there was a sense of familiarity as well. It made me think that regardless of what year of college you are in or what discipline you are studying, death has a way of tying us all together.

**Pepper:** Hi again. Pepper. I think we spoke about this the last time that we met, but I'm always thinking about death since Pop died. Like, I'm still anxious and on edge that the people I love could die at any time, you know? For instance, I keep wondering how much time I have left with my grandma because she's been slowing down too. Even my brother. I'm more paranoid now about where he is and what he is doing, so I make sure that he texts me whenever he goes somewhere so that I know that he is okay. So that's something that I've been thinking about since we last met.

**Olivia:** Thank you all for sharing. A lot of intriguing topics have come up in our re-introductions with one another. I'll leave it to the group to see where you all want to take this discussion.

**Quinn:** I'd like to talk about what Pepper said. About feeling anxious. You know, I've felt more anxious since Candy passed away. I've been in therapy since I was in high school, so I've chatted with my therapist about this too, and they helped me to get back on the medications I need. But yeah, it's been hard being so far from my therapist because I can only see them when I go home on long weekends or breaks since I'm from Nevada.

**Pepper:** Have you tried seeing someone on campus?

**Quinn:** I have, and I didn't connect with anyone there.

**Pepper:** YES! Same! I tried to go to the campus counseling center, and I couldn't find anyone who seemed to know how to work with a queer person of color. I made an appointment on their website based on their specialty, but when I met with them, they were skin folk but not kinfolk, you know what I mean? It's so hard to find good people on this campus.

**Olivia:** I didn't use counseling services until Sachi passed away, and I was in my master's program. I found it was helpful to shop around for a good therapist and not feel bad if I asked for a referral for another person if I didn't click with the first person. Because to be real, I wasn't sure if I could afford to see a counselor once I graduated since that can get pricey. I rather have my student fees pay for that type of service. *Olivia laughs out loud.* Because you know freelancing is not always a money-making enterprise.

**Leo:** That's 100. Especially as students, we don't have a lot of money, and most of us are in debt, so it's good when there are free resources for us. You see, I'm here on a graduate assistantship. If I didn't have that, I don't think I could afford to be here right now. Even when my uncle died, I didn't have enough money to fly home to Chicago for his funeral. So I probably won't get to visit his grave until I go back home this summer. But the thing that hurts the most is that I can't physically be there for my father. Because as much as phone calls and FaceTime is great, it can't compare to being there in person.

**Quinn:** Yeah. I know what you mean. My mom's sister died unexpectedly a few years ago in New York. And for the Jewish internment, you need to bury the deceased within 24 hours to 48



hours. And of course, me being a broke doc student on the other side of the country, I didn't have enough money at that time to fly myself there. Even for Candy's funeral, there is absolutely no way that I would have been able to fly internationally to say my goodbyes to her in person because that would have been way out of my price range. So all I could do was send her parents a condolence card even though I wish I could have been at Candy's service.

*The group engages in a discussion about the high cost of death-related services. Topics such as hospital bills, funeral services, and the cost of burial sites are mentioned. As the conversation begins to slow down, Sara speaks up.*

**Sara:** Yeah. I'm from a low-income family, so finances have always been complicated. And I never really realized how much funeral costs were until my brother, Lucas, died. I ended up creating a GoFundMe account to help with his funeral costs and shared it on my social media. I'm fortunate that my classmates chipped in and shared it with their friends as well. Some even came to my brother's funeral, which was kind of them. But seriously, if it weren't for the generosity of others, I'm not sure how we would have covered those expenses.

*Others chimed in about the different things that their peers did for them that was helpful during their bereavement, as well as some problematic interactions that they had with their peers.*

*Olivia glances down at her phone to see how much time they have remaining.*

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone, for sharing. I just noticed that we are coming close to time again and only have a few more minutes together. Does anyone else have something they'd like to add to the group before we start wrapping things up? *Olivia looks around the room.*

**Pepper:** After hearing all of your stories today, it made me think a lot about the privileges that I hold. Even though I didn't have an easy childhood, one thing that was helpful for me when Pop passed away was that I never had to worry about how to get back for his funeral. My grandparents were pretty wealthy, so when Pop passed, I just emailed my faculty members that I had to go home for a death in the family, then used my credit card to book a flight right away. I guess I'm fortunate in that aspect because I know that not everyone can do that.

**Olivia:** Thank you for sharing, Pepper. Anyone else?

*Ten seconds pass in silence.*

**Olivia:** Okay, well, let's close out our group today with a word that sums up how we are feeling, shall we? Would anyone like to start us off?

**Pepper:** Lucky.

**Olivia:** Thoughtful.

**Leo:** Good.

**Quinn:** Affirmed.

**Sara:** Thankful.

**Olivia:** Thank you all. Before everyone leaves, are there any requests for snacks for next month?

**Pepper:** Can you bring brownies? I'm happy to chip in, but I can't bring it since I'm coming straight from class.

**Olivia:** Let me see what I can do! *Olivia smiles.* Until then, please help me finish up this cake! And please take some for your friends. See you all next month!

**OLIVIA'S APARTMENT:** *Sitting at the dining table, Olivia pours herself a glass of milk to go with her leftover slice of vanilla cake from the Death Café. Muffin drops her stuffed toy and runs to the dining room once she hears the clinking of the plate and fork. Staring up at Olivia with her deep brown puppy eyes, Muffin begins to sniff the air.*

**Olivia:** Okay, Muffin. It's only fair that if I have a snack, you can have one too. Let me see what we've got.

*Olivia goes over to Muffin's snack stash and picks out a meatball and tosses it to Muffin. Muffin chews the meatball with delight.*

**Olivia:** Death Café # 2 is in the books, Muffin! And everyone showed up again. It's so great to see that people are continuing to open up again.

*Olivia puts a fork-full of vanilla cake in her mouth and chases it down with some milk.*

**Olivia:** You know what, Muffin? Today, people started to talk about finances. Isn't that interesting? Talking about death and finances, the two of the so-called taboo subjects! *Muffin tilts her head.* It's wild to think about how our finances, or lack thereof, could prevent someone from saying their final goodbyes.

*Muffin starts to paw at Olivia's leg. This is Muffin's way of asking Olivia for another meatball. Olivia gets the bag of meatballs, motions for Muffin to sit then tosses it in the air to Muffin.*

**Olivia:** That old saying, “money can’t buy happiness or money can’t buy everything,” is not 100% accurate, you know? Having that financial security and access to funds is crucial for so many people who have experienced a death loss not only to travel before someone dies, but also to assist with everything once the death loss occurs. In a way, funerals and other similar ceremonies are really for the living, not the dead. These events help the living to pay their respects to the dead, express their emotions and speak their truth, and be surrounded by others. Not having that economic privilege to travel for death-related visits may create barriers for individuals to process their death loss, especially if finances prevented them from providing the closure that they needed. I mean, if students don’t get that closure that they need, I’m sure that this must show up in various ways including their academics, right? Plus, it may bring up various feelings such as sadness, anger, or guilt based on the person’s culture, upbringing, and life circumstances. Isn’t that right, Muffin?

*Olivia looks around her apartment to see where Muffin is and spots that Muffin is comfortably licking her paws in her crate.*

**Olivia:** I know that not all of these Death Café participants had the means to attend their loved one’s funeral service. I guess in the following months I may hear how this is showing up for them. I just hope that they are able to find whatever closure that they may need.

*Olivia finishes her cup of milk and places her dirty dishes in the sink.*

**Olivia:** Muffin, these Death Café treats are too yummy for my own good. Want to go walk it off with me?

*Muffin excitedly climbs out of her crate and heads to the door. Olivia clips the leash on Muffin's collar, and they head on their evening walk.*

### **Death Café Meeting #3:**

#### **Experiencing a Deep Loss**

**AFTERNOON AT THE CAMPUS CAFÉ.** *It is April, and the smell of homemade brownies fills the air of the backroom of the café. Olivia proudly takes the cover off of the brownies that just came out of the oven a little while ago. The group starts to enter the room.*

**Pepper:** Olivia, you remembered the brownies!

**Olivia:** Yes! They're brownies from a box, but I made them myself! *Olivia laughs.*

**Pepper:** They smell delicious. I've been craving a brownie for such a long time. Thank you.

These are exactly what I needed. *Pepper takes a bite out of the brownie. Yummmmm.*

Chocolatey goodness. It hits the spot!

**Olivia:** *Olivia smiles and claps her hands in delight.* Yay! I'm glad you like them.

*Sara, Leo, and Quinn make their way into the back of the room and help themselves to Olivia's brownies. As the last person helps themselves to a brownie, Olivia begins to speak.*

**Olivia:** Hi, everyone. If you could please join us in the circle when you are ready, we are about to get started. *Everyone takes their seats.* Alright, it's so great to see you all again. This is our third Death Café. By now, you may be getting the hang of our schedule. We'll start with a moment of silence, go over introductions and check-ins, and then we'll dive into our

conversation. I'll let you know when our discussion time is coming to an end, and we'll end with our words of the day. Sound good? *Everyone's head nod.*

**Olivia:** Great, I'll set my phone alarm for one minute.

*Olivia sets the timer on her phone for one minute. Everyone is silent until the alarm goes off.*

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone. I would like us to continue with our introductions by sharing your name and how you've all been since we last saw one another. Would anyone like to start?

**Pepper:** I can start us off. Pepper. First of all, thank you, Olivia, for remembering our last conversation and for bringing the brownies! *Everyone nods their heads in agreement.* Since we last met, things have been going well. I started to have real conversations with my grandma about what her wishes are when she dies since we've never had that conversation before. I don't think I would have ever asked her these things before coming to the Death Café, but these meetings have helped me to ask the important questions. Anyways, she loves her garden, so she told me that she wants to be cremated and buried in her garden. It's so interesting. I always thought she would want to be buried with Pop at the graveyard, but she said that she wants to be surrounded by her beautiful flowers. I mean, I don't even know if that's legal, but those are her wishes. Other than that, my brother just started seeing a counselor in high school who has been helping him to process everything that happened. So that makes me feel relieved that he's able to talk about his feelings with someone else. That's what's new with me! *Pepper turns towards Quinn.*

**Quinn:** Quinn. I just found out when I was online that an old classmate of mine died. I guess when you're around my age, you end up losing more and more people. But the sad thing is that

John, my classmate, is leaving behind his wife and two young boys. One of his boys is about three years old, and the other one is not even a one-year-old. It's so sad. Because John was such a great person, and it breaks my heart that his boys are going to grow up without their father around. So I've been thinking a lot about John and his family. That's what's up with me.

**Leo:** Leo. I was talking to my mother yesterday, and she reminded me that my grandma, her mother, died two years ago. It's so weird how time seems to fly by so quickly. I haven't brought up my grandmother's death in this group, because I feel that she lived a good, full life, and died as peacefully as it gets, surrounded by her family and friends. It was a good death, you know? She wasn't in pain, and it wasn't drawn out. That's the kind of death that I would love to have when that time comes, where you're able to say your goodbyes and are surrounded by loved ones. So I've been thinking a lot about my grandma. *Leo turns his body towards Sara.*

**Sara:** Sara. You know, after our last meeting and hearing people talk about counseling and therapy, I ended up looking into it more for myself. I come from a family that doesn't believe in counseling. My mom doesn't want me to spread our family's business with strangers, so I never thought therapy was ever going to be an option for me. But I found someone who I like on campus. She gets me. She's another woman of color and knows how to speak to me. I appreciate that she talks about how going to counseling is an investment in myself. She has a way to make things click for me, you know? So it's been good to talk to her about everything because she also understands what happens to people when they have cancer because she lost her father to cancer. These things have made it easier to talk with her about what happened with Lucas.

**Olivia:** Olivia. Since we last spoke, I had an aunt die. She caught something when she was traveling abroad and ended up dying abruptly. They are still trying to figure out what happened.

To be honest, I wasn't really close to her because I've only seen her maybe every other year growing up. But it's been sad to hear that her siblings are all fighting about who gets what of hers. I hate how ugly people get with these types of things. It makes me want to donate everything to a charity when I die to avoid all this unnecessary drama.

*A few people nod in agreement.*

**Olivia:** Alright. Thank you, everyone, for sharing. Where would we all like to start?

**Quinn:** After hearing everyone's check-in, I guess I'm curious to hear about what people's experience or exposure to death has been up to this point. I mean, I'm in my 30s, and I have already experienced so much death in my lifetime.

**Pepper:** I shared this earlier, but my mom died when I was about four years old. I also knew someone who passed away, but it wasn't a deep loss like Pop. I feel so bad saying this. But it was different, you know? I'm not sure if any of you read about this, but I was on the same floor as the student who died by suicide during my first year in college. I knew them and had spoken to them a few times, but that was pretty much it. I remember coming back to my residence hall one day and seeing a lot of police officers and hall staff on my floor. That's when one of my neighbors told me what happened. There were counselors on the floor that week, but I never met with any of them. Although it was a terrible situation, it didn't affect me as it did for her two other roommates, since she lived in a triple.

**Leo:** In addition to my uncle, I also lost my maternal grandmother about two years ago. We also had a family friend who passed away last year from a heart attack, and I also lost a cousin due to a surfing accident. Although these deaths were sad and some were unexpected, they didn't carry



the same weight as the loss of my uncle if that makes sense. I guess because we were much closer to my uncle and because my father took my uncle's death the hardest, I see the after-effects from my uncle's passing on a daily basis.

**Sara:** I've lost a few people in my life. My godmother died when I was in elementary school. It was so long ago, but I think that was my first memory of someone close to me dying. Also, my soccer coach, who was also my mentor, died the summer before I started college. That was sad because he died so young and left behind his wife and baby girl. Another recent death loss that happened a year ago was that an old friend from high school died from a car accident. Even though I was sad to learn about her passing on Facebook, it didn't have the same impact on me as when Lucas died. I guess that is why I haven't mentioned them until now.

**Olivia:** In addition to losing my roommate Sachi, I also lost my grandfather when I was in college. His health was slowly declining, but I always thought that he'd have more time. I thought that I would see him in the summer when I was on break, but that wasn't the case. He died during the spring semester. It was sad because I wasn't there when he passed, but I was able to go back home for his funeral service.

**Quinn:** Thank you all for sharing. I still find it fascinating that we all walk around this campus and would never know the types of losses that we've experienced just by our appearances. I mean, during my time in college, I've only heard of one other person who shared with me that they lost their dad. And I think they didn't share this information with a lot of people, too. It just goes to show you how important it is to be kind to others because you never really know what others are going through.

*Heads start to nod around the circle.*

**Leo:** I feel that some deaths aren't as painful or sad as others. Take my grandma, for example, who lived a good, full life. I mean, I felt good that she was able to live long enough to see her children grow up and for her to spend time with her grandchildren. Even though she is dead, I believe that she's in heaven now and living her best afterlife. I think for me, it is harder when people die at a younger age, especially when their lives are just starting or if they are leaving behind young children.

**Sara:** Yes. My brother, Lucas, died when he was young. Growing up, I always imagined what he'd be like when he got older. He loved building things with his Legos, so I believed that he was going to be this fantastic architect when he was older. So it's heartbreaking to think that his life was cut so short. When he died, my hopes and dreams for him and what our lives would be like in the future died, which makes his death even more painful. *Sara pauses, and her eyes begin to water.* But even with Coach Jackson, it was sad that he died so young. Now his baby girl will be growing up without him in her life.

**Pepper:** Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about people who grow up after experiencing a death loss. I mean, when my mom died, I was only four. And that has shaped my upbringing and how I see the world. Even though I'm studying Women and Gender Studies right now, I'm considering going to grad school so that I can become a counselor and help others who have experienced loss in their lives. I think it's important for there to be more queer people of color who are counselors because I could have really benefited from something like this.

**Leo:** That's awesome, Pepper!

**Sara:** Yeah, we need more good people like you to be counselors!

*Everyone smiles and nods in agreement. After the group engages with each other about whether their death losses have shaped their career paths, the conversation starts to dissipate.*

**Olivia:** Okay, everyone. We are coming up to our time again. Anyone else have any last thoughts that they would like to share?

**Sara:** I have something to add. I think talking about Lucas and Coach Jackson brought up a lot of different emotions for me. I'm sad and irritated about how they died. Like it's not fair what happened to them because they still had their whole life ahead of them. I mean, I guess it's never really fair when anyone dies, but you know what I mean. I guess our time together has given me more topics that I want to untangle and process with my counselor this week.

**Quinn:** I started today by saying that I felt that I have experienced so much death already. And I guess as I get older, I'm sure this will continue to happen. It's such a humbling experience, you know? Like death doesn't target anyone in particular. The old, the young, the healthy, and the sick are all susceptible. I guess it's a good reminder for myself to not lose focus on what matters to me. I mean, school is important, and I will finish my doctorate, but life is more than just a degree. It's about the people in our lives that we love and the connections that we have with them. And I have to remind myself of this.

**Olivia:** *Olivia nods.* Thank you for sharing. Would anyone else like to add anything? *Heads shake "no" around the room.* Well, let's wrap up with a word that shares how we are feeling. Shall we? I can start off today. Inspired.

**Pepper:** Determined.

**Quinn:** Clarity.

**Leo:** Hopeful.

**Sara:** Emotional.

**Olivia:** Thank you all for opening up and sharing with the group today. Talking about those who we love and have lost can bring up different types of emotions for everyone, so be kind to yourselves, and please do what you need to take care of yourselves. *Olivia pauses.* Well, that wraps up today's meeting. Are there any snack preferences for the next time we meet?

**Quinn:** I have a suggestion. Instead of you always bringing something for us, why don't we all support the café and buy our own pastries and drinks next month?

**Sara:** Yeah, that works for me!

*Everyone nods their heads in agreement.*

**Olivia:** Sounds good to me! Great suggestion. Yes, it would be great to support this café since the owners have been so wonderful with hosting us this year. Thanks, everyone. See you next month!

**OLIVIA'S APARTMENT:** *Olivia opens the door to her apartment to find that Muffin was taking a nap on the couch.*

**Olivia:** Hey, Muffin! How was your day?

*Muffin jumps off of the couch and greets Olivia in excitement. Olivia puts down her bag and makes her way to the couch. Muffin jumps back on the couch and leans into Olivia to be pet.*

**Olivia:** Muffin, what do you think of the term ‘deep loss’? Pepper used it today, and I can’t stop thinking about that term. So many of us from the Death Café have experienced different types of death losses over time, but after hearing most of their stories, it seems like they all have a prominent death loss(es) that stand out to them the most.

*Muffin rolls on her back to get a belly rub.*

**Olivia:** I mean, I guess that even applies to me. I ended up talking about Sachi with the group even though I experienced more than just her death. I also lost my grandfather during college. I think I ended up sharing more about Sachi because that was the death that really impacted me emotionally, you know? Especially since she died so young, and the circumstances surrounding her death were so tragic.

*Muffin continues to stretch out on her back.*

**Olivia:** The other fascinating thing that stood out to me from today’s meeting is how Leo was talking about not being as sad when someone has died after living a full life. I mean, I could see his point, but I also thought about people like Pepper. Pepper mentioned that Pop died at an old age after living a full-life, but Pepper took his death hard due to the close relationship that they had. I guess it just goes to show you how everyone interacts with death and grief in such different ways.

*Muffin jumps off the couch and starts to drink water from her bowl.*

**Olivia:** I guess, it's just so fascinating that so many of us have lost several people in our lives, but in our Death Café meetings, we typically don't mention every single death that we've experienced. I was actually surprised at how many people we have lost in our lives. This brings up the idea of what is considered to be a deep loss. Some people at the Death Café considered a deep loss to be based on the close relationship that they had developed with the deceased. Other people experienced a deep loss when it came to untimely deaths, especially when it happens to children or young adults. There were also deep losses when deaths continued to have an impact on the living. When hearing everyone's stories today, it seems like their deep losses fell into one or more of these types of categories. I guess to sum it up, everyone's deep loss was the death that they found to be most profound. Those were the stories that came up most frequently at the Death Café.

**Olivia:** Okay, Muffin. Thanks for letting me reflect on this for a bit. You're such a good listener! What would I do without you? Ready for your walk?

*Muffin's ears perk up, and she heads to the door for her evening walk.*

#### **Death Café Meeting #4:**

##### **Pushing Through**

**AFTERNOON AT THE CAMPUS CAFÉ.** *It is May, and the sky is overcast. The café is lively, with individuals working on their laptops. As agreed upon, everyone has decided to purchase a drink and pastry item to support the café. As members of the Death Café see each other in line, they begin to chat as they wait for their drink orders. People start to make their way to their room once they have their drink and snack in hand.*

**Olivia:** Hello again, everyone. Your drinks and pastry items smell so wonderful! The owners of the café have been generous with our group by letting us use their back room this year, free of charge, so thank you again for supporting them. Well, same as usual, we will start the day off with a minute of silence for those that we have lost. Shall we? *Head nods are seen throughout the room. Olivia takes out her cell phone and starts the one-minute timer. One minute later, the alarm goes off.*

**Olivia:** Alright. I was thinking that for our introductions today, we could start by talking about the people that helped you all after your death loss(es). Would anyone like to start us off?

**Pepper:** Sure, I can go. *Pepper clears their throat.* I would say that the person that helped me the most when Pop died would probably have been my ex, Rex. They were just really kind and supportive of me during that time. Whether it was chatting with me at all hours of the day/night or inviting me to their family's place for the holidays, it felt good to have someone that I could talk to about what was going on with me at that time. We broke up a few months ago, but I'll always be thankful for Rex for helping me through that challenging time.

**Sara:** I would have to say that after Lucas died, the people who were there for me were my close friends back home. I mean, they had grown up knowing Lucas, too, and saw all the ups and downs that we went through. So it helped to be able to talk with them about what I was going through. Because they got it and they know about my family dynamics, you know?

**Quinn:** To be honest, I can't really think of anyone in particular who helped me during this time. I think it was more of me just processing all the deaths that have happened. And I'm an introvert, so I think it was good that I got some time to process things for myself on my own time and at

my own pace. However, I will say that it was nice when friends would still invite me to things, even though they knew I would probably not attend.

**Olivia:** I would say that my parents were helpful in that they helped me not to lose sight of finishing off strong with my classes. They knew that Sachi's death had been really impactful for me, but they didn't want Sachi's death to completely derail my studies and my experience in college. So they were good about checking in with me and reminding me of what my goals were. It was good to get that honest and practical advice and check-ins.

**Leo:** For me, I guess I would have to say that my church group has been really helpful for me. I'm a man of faith, and getting together with other church members helped me when my uncle died, especially since we meet regularly. And they have really helped me to lean into my faith and trust that everything is going to be okay. So they have been an incredible support system for me.

**Olivia:** Thank you all for sharing. Where would we all like to start today's conversation?

*No one speaks. Everyone continues to eat their food and does not make any eye contact with Olivia.*

**Olivia:** Well, perhaps we could start by revisiting how the death loss/death losses have impacted you all as college students. We've all been together for a few months now, and I would love to hear how you all are doing academically since we last spoke about this.

**Quinn:** *Quinn clears her throat.* When Candy first died, I was a little rattled at first. You know, it's so bizarre to lose someone at such a relatively young age, you know? I think the first week or



so, my mind would wander in class because I was just thinking about her and mortality in general. Like what's it going to be like when my parents die and when I die. I noticed that my attention span wasn't like it usually was, and I ended up getting some poor marks on some papers that I submitted. So that was a big wakeup call for me. Getting those poor marks made me snap out of that funk, because that is not the type of person I am. I kept thinking that Candy would have been so upset with me if her death loss interfered with my doctoral program. And heck, I also want to finish this program for my parents and myself, you know? So ever since then, I have really thrown myself into my studies. And to be honest, just focusing on my studies has been a good distraction from all these other things going on in my life because this is something that I can control. Now I'm making a lot of progress in my program.

**Pepper:** Yeah, I've dealt with a lot of issues with anxiety since Pop died. I mean, I'm always fearful that if I don't hear back from my grandma or brother when I text them, that something terrible has happened to them, even if in reality they just had their phones on silent or forgot to text back. And I wasn't like that before I lost Pop. But for me, Pop's death made me more serious about my studies. Like, before he died, college was just a natural progression of what was expected that I do after high school. But now that Pop is gone, it's made me more serious about my studies because I know that one day my grandma is going to die too, and then it will just be my brother and myself. Oh yeah, I also started connecting with this great queer P.O.C faculty member who checked up on me one day after they saw me crying in the building shortly after Pop's death. She works in the College of Education, and even though she's not in Women and Gender Studies, she's become a great mentor to me. She's been talking to me about my future and has encouraged me to think about graduate school. So now, I do my best to carve out time to focus on my studies and have been looking into graduate programs.

**Leo:** I'll be honest. It's been hard keeping up with things in my program. You know, at first, I wasn't too much behind other people in my program. But it seems like all the other people in my cohort are progressing way ahead of me. And it kind of sucks, you know? Because they aren't dealing with all this family drama. But these past few months, I've really had to motivate myself to make progress in this program. I think once I started to make some progress in my coursework, I was re-inspired and got energized again about this program.

**Sara:** Ever since Lucas died, I've been struggling with things in school. I didn't realize I was struggling until some faculty members told me that the papers that I submitted and some of the things that I was saying didn't quite make sense. I think I mentioned this before, but I ended up falling behind in some classes and assignments. I've been talking to my counselor about this, and she's helped me to get on some medication, which has helped. Now, I've been pushing myself to just finish this degree. My grades haven't been the greatest, but it should be enough for me to graduate this year.

**Olivia:** Speaking from personal experience, I know that it can be tough to navigate campus as a bereaved college student. Similar to many of you, I had to figure out how to deal with all these heavy issues while staying afloat with my classes. I ended up disclosing my roommate's death loss to my faculty members, so they knew what was going on with me. And I think they gave me some grace during that trying semester. *Pauses and looks around the room.* What about you all? Did faculty members or others know what was going on?

**Leo:** I'm not close to my faculty like that. It wouldn't feel natural just to tell them that my uncle died and how that's impacted my family because we don't have that type of relationship like that, you know? And I don't want to go into my whole life story. Plus, I live off-campus, so I

haven't really connected with my cohort besides some group projects, so none of them know.

But my close friends and family members back at home all know, and I'm really thankful to have them in my life.

**Sara:** I've met with some faculty members about my papers, but I haven't told them about what has been happening with me. I mean, they rarely make time for me regularly. My advisor, for example, is really busy and usually only meets with us once a semester for our 1:1 check-in. I mean, they're so well respected in this field, but that leaves little time for connecting with their students because they're busy writing and traveling all the time. So I've been selective about sharing this information.

**Pepper:** All my faculty members gave their condolences to me when I lost Pop, but I don't think they truly know how important Pop was to me. Most of them just think I lost a grandfather, but they don't understand that he was also my dad. But the POC faculty member who I told you all about has been such a great support system for me, and she gets it. My counselor has also been supportive. So I guess I have some good support systems here on campus.

**Quinn:** I feel like people don't understand my close relationship with Candy, so I haven't shared this information with others. You know, with classmates or faculty members. So really, you all are pretty much the only people on campus that know what's going on with me.

**Olivia:** Thank you all for sharing. Whether or not you have chosen to disclose your death loss with others or not, hopefully, being a part of this Death Café has helped you to express yourself and connect with others. As we start to wrap up today, would anyone else like to add anything?

*Everyone shakes their heads no.*

**Olivia:** Well, it is currently May, which means that there is only a little over one more month until the end of the semester. This means that next month will be the last Death Café for this academic year. We'll follow the usual format, but would you like me to bring anything in particular for us to eat?

**Sara:** I have a suggestion. Would we all be okay with doing a potluck next month?

**Quinn:** I like that idea!

**Leo:** Since this is a Death Café, would you all be open to bringing in a dish that reminds you of someone significant who you lost? And that could be our introduction question next month?

**Pepper:** Works for me! Just know that I'll probably be bringing in something store-bought because I have class right before this.

**Olivia:** That sounds excellent, everyone. This should be fun! Alright, well, let's plan for that. To close out our group for today, would anyone like to start sharing the word that describes how you're feeling?

**Pepper:** Energized

**Leo:** Determined

**Olivia:** Reflective

**Sara:** Resilient

**Quinn:** *Quinn smiles and looks at Sara.* Also, resilient.

**Olivia:** Alright, everyone. Thank you all for coming today. Looking forward to what you all bring next month. Have a good night!

**OLIVIA'S APARTMENT:** Olivia opens the door to her apartment and sees that Muffin has been sleeping on the couch. Muffin jumps off the couch and begins to stretch out on the floor.

**Olivia:** Hi, sleepy! Did you have a good nap? *Olivia puts down her bag and sits at the end of the couch. Muffin hops back on the couch and paws Olivia for some attention. Olivia begins to rub Muffin's chest.*

**Olivia:** Is that better, Muffin? *Olivia yawns.* I'm just as tired as you, Muffin! But we had such a good meeting at the Death Café. They decided to do a potluck next month for our last meeting. How great is that? *Muffin tilts her head.* I mean, it's so fitting for our last get together of the academic year, and they came up with that suggestion on their own. *Olivia sighs.* What a great group.

*Olivia makes her way to the fridge, heats some leftover food, and sits at the dining table. Muffin comes over and watches Olivia as she eats.*

**Olivia:** Muffin, today's Death Café was so interesting. I prompted the group to talk about how they're doing academically, and most of them disclosed that they had initially encountered academic difficulties following their death loss. However, they have all shown such educational resilience, and it's so great to see how they are continuing to push through with their studies. It's not been an easy process for them, but they have used their inner drive, their belief in themselves, as well as their support systems to uplift them during this difficult time.

*Olivia looks down as Muffin paws her leg. Olivia bends down to pet Muffin's chest and continues to reflect.*

**Olivia:** For Quinn and Pepper, hearing constructive feedback on papers or having positive faculty interactions helped them to turn things around. In fact, focusing on their academics was a good distraction strategy from the death loss and helped Quinn to perform well in school. For Sara, getting the proper medication was helpful in her getting back on track so that she could make progress. Lastly, for Leo, chipping away at his program and making incremental progress helped him to feel more confident and re-inspired about his studies which helped him to push through with his studies.

*Muffin paws at Olivia's leg. Olivia reaches down to pet Muffin on her back.*

**Olivia:** You know what, Muffin? In addition to the previously mentioned strategies, all participants shared how their support systems helped them push through as well. Friends, family members, ex-partners, faculty members, and counselors were instrumental in being there for them to process what they were going through. By supporting them as human beings and talking about how the death loss was impacting them, they could then re-focus and engage in their roles as students. It's interesting to see the different people that rally around us to support us when we need it most. Sometimes we just need that one person to have our back to help us push through and succeed. Just like you, Muffin! What would I do without you?

*Muffin continues pawing at Olivia's leg, begging for some of Olivia's food.*

**Olivia:** Muffin, I can't give you this. You know that. But how about I give you a treat and then we can go for your walk? *Olivia walks over to get the doggy treat bag, tosses Muffin a doggy biscuit, and heads over to grab Muffin's leash.* Alright, Muffin. Are you ready?

*Muffin's eyes get big, and she excitedly makes her way to the door for her nightly walk.*

### **Death Café Meeting #5:**

#### **See You Later**

**AFTERNOON AT THE CAMPUS CAFÉ.** *It is June, and the sun is out. Olivia lays out her homemade dish on the table and begins to take out the plates, napkins, and forks from her tote bag. Olivia looks up and sees that Leo and Sara are chatting in line at the café as they wait to place their drink order. Pepper and Quinn then enter the café with their potluck items in hand and make their way to the back room.*

**Olivia:** Hi, everyone. Everything looks and smells great. I can't wait to hear what you all brought!

*Leo and Sara join the rest of the group after they get their drink order from the café. Everyone begins to make themselves a plate of what everyone has brought to share.*

**Olivia:** Alright, everyone. We are about to get started. Please feel free to make a plate and join us when you are ready. *Everyone makes their way to their seats.* Thank you so much for bringing a dish for all of us to share today. As usual, I will set my timer for a minute for our moment of silence.

*Olivia pulls out her phone and sets her alarm for one minute. One minute later, the alarm goes off.*

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone, for engaging in the moment of silence to honor those who we have lost. It's such a beautiful day today, and what makes it even more special is that you all suggested bringing in dishes that remind you of loved ones who you have lost. Therefore we'll start the day by sharing the meaning behind the dish you brought today. Would anyone like to start us off?

**Pepper:** I can go. It's not homemade, but there's a story behind it. I brought in candied popcorn. Pop was a big fan of the movie theater, so some of my favorite memories of him are when just he and I would see a film together and how he would buy candied popcorn for us to share. We actually went to the opening of the first luxury theater in my hometown, and he loved it! That is one of my favorite memories of him. *Pepper looks in Sara's direction.*

**Sara:** Today I made for you all hamburger sliders. Lucas and I would often go to the Burger Shack after school. It was like our thing. We would share a burger and fries and then color on those activity placemat things. These are such small, ordinary things that we did, but those are some of my most cherished memories of him. Anyways, I hope you all like the sliders!

**Olivia:** I brought in some homemade blueberry scones because my roommate, Sachi, loved high tea. Like absolutely loved it! It was always so funny. I remember that she kept trying to convince me to go to high tea. I was always hesitant at first because of how much it costs, but one day I finally caved in and loved it. I ended up falling in love with cucumber sandwiches, but she



always loved the scones. One of my favorite memories of her is when she wore this elaborate, large brimmed hat to high tea. She was such a character, and I always remember her like that.

**Leo:** I would have brought some beer, because my favorite memories of my uncle were at the bar. *Laughs out loud.* But I decided to bring in donuts because he loved those too! He would always bring a box of donuts to share whenever we visited our family. I remember one time, he had seen a homeless person on the street by the donut shop. He ended up buying her a cup of coffee and a donut, and they started chatting. He learned that the woman's husband had died, and after a series of unfortunate events, she became homeless. My uncle saw that woman a few more times on his donut runs, and he ended up pulling some strings to get her a job at his buddy's place. My uncle always had such a big heart. Anyways, that's the story behind these donuts.

**Quinn:** Hey, everyone! I decided to bring in some fairy bread. When Candy moved to Australia, she told me about fairy bread, which is basically bread with butter and colorful candied sprinkles. She absolutely fell in love with fairy bread and didn't understand why she never learned about this when she was living in the United States. So whenever we would Skype, she would always be eating fairy bread!!! But that was one of my favorite memories of her, discovering her love for fairy bread as she transitioned to her life in Australia.

**Olivia:** Thank you all. I had a chance to try a little bit of everything and what I love not only how they all taste, but also the stories behind them. So thank you all for sharing your dishes and the memories of your loved ones. *Pauses.* Did we want to start anywhere in particular for today's conversation?

*The group starts to reminisce about how anxious they were to attend the Death Café and how far they have come since then. Participants reflected on the past few months and started sharing stories of personal growth and success.*

**Leo:** I guess I can share some good news with you all. I mentioned earlier that I am in a dual masters/doctoral program. And well, I am excited to share that I've completed all my requirements for the master's part of this program.

*Everyone around the room congratulates Leo.*

**Leo:** Thanks! Yeah, I didn't want to jinx anything by mentioning anything last month. But yeah, it feels really good to be in this phase of my program. It makes getting this Ph.D. seem more attainable now that I have completed the masters portion of this journey. And I wanted to thank you all for helping me to process everything these past few months. I'm not sure that I would be where I am today without all of your support. So thank you.

**Quinn:** Congrats, Leo! I'll go next. I also wanted to thank this group for providing this safe, consistent space for me. Losing Candy was really hard, and I'm such an introvert that I never thought I would participate in a Death Café before. Attending this group was a stretch for me because I don't typically go to group outings with people I don't know, but I am so happy that I challenged myself and stuck with it. Since we've been meeting, I've been able to make good progress in my doc program and just got the date when I'm going to be taking my comprehensive exams. And I genuinely think that this group helped me in this process because if I had completely ignored my feelings and what I was going through, I don't know if I would be preparing for my comps right now.

**Sara:** Hi, everyone. I want to be honest with you all and not sugar coat anything, but I am still devastated by Lucas' death. I know people say that time heals all, but I don't know if I'll ever really get over this feeling. But through these Death Café meetups and my meetings with my counselor, I've been able to practice more mindfulness activities to calm down all the noise and distraction in my head. I started taking some free yoga classes in the community and have even made it a point to drive out of the city to be near the ocean, which has been good for me. Hopefully this summer I'll be able to keep this up!

**Pepper:** Similar to Sara, I'm not sure if I'll ever get over this sadness of losing Pop. Every night before we have a Death Café, I have to mentally prepare and amp myself up for these meetups. Not because I don't want to be here, but because I know how emotionally draining it can be to talk about these things. And I know this isn't supposed to be a counseling group, but attending these Death Cafés have been good for me, and I'm so happy to have met you all and know that I'm not alone in this.

**Leo:** Yeah. I totally agree. Before, I thought that I was the only one going through this type of significant loss because people don't talk about this openly, you know? Especially in my culture, men are expected not to show their emotions. So this is new for me, to share things about myself so openly without judgment. *Everyone nods their head.* I'm genuinely thankful to have met you all through the Death Café because I'm not sure if our paths would have crossed otherwise.

**Olivia:** Isn't it amazing how much we have learned about one another in such a short amount of time? Can you imagine what this would be like if everyone spoke about death and loss openly?

**Pepper:** I know. After attending these Death Cafés, one thing that I started to do was to have more open conversations with my younger brother about death so that he's not re-traumatized about it when it happens again. Because who knows how much longer our grandma has. I mean I hope she lives a long and healthy life, but you never know what the future holds.

**Sara:** How have those conversations with your brother been?

**Pepper:** Good, I think. I mean, he is asking a lot of questions. And he's not afraid to talk about his feelings, which is fantastic. I just wish that type of thing was more ingrained into our society.

**Sara:** That's great to hear, Pepper. I mean, even though Lucas was sick with cancer, we avoided talking about death with him because we didn't want to scare him. But I wonder if we had talked about death more regularly if that would have prepared all of us a little bit better. Not to avoid it. I mean, heck. Even at his funeral, I couldn't bring myself to talk about Lucas because talking about him was so difficult.

**Olivia:** Quinn. It looked like you were deep in thought. Did you want to share anything?

**Quinn:** I've been listening to everyone talk about norming discussions about death. And I was trying to think about the messages that I grew up with about death. And to be honest, I think I learned the most about death through TV shows or social media. But really, I think that we talk about death more in society than we have ever before. However, the thing is, we talk about death in the media with celebrities and serial killers but not necessarily the deaths that impact us on a more personal and emotional level.

*Acknowledgement can be heard coming from the group.*

**Olivia:** Good point, Quinn. I agree that now more than ever, death and death-related topics are more readily available than ever before due to technology. Whether it is through books, documentaries, podcasts, shows, or websites, people have more access than ever to learn more about these types of topics. However, what is less common is having open and honest conversations about death on a personal and emotional level, as Quinn mentioned. I think that's why I have such a strong passion for Death Cafés so much. *Olivia pauses and looks at her phone.* Well, it seems like time sneaked upon us again. I want to open the space up for any last comments that you all have.

**Leo:** I just want to say thank you, Olivia, for hosting these Death Cafés for us. I know you're not getting paid for this, and you put in so much time to not only make us feel welcomed in the space, but you always bring such delicious treats for us. Thank you!

**Pepper:** I agree. Classes and life, in general, have had so many ups and downs, but I always looked forward to meeting up with you all this year. And that's thanks to the work you, Olivia, have done to hold this space for us. And thank you to all of you too for being so vulnerable and speaking your truths.

**Sara:** Yes, this is such a special and powerful group. You know, I was wondering if I could find these types of groups as a grad student. Because most times, these types of things are only for undergrads. So thank you for allowing grad students to have a voice in this space and for providing us with a community.

**Quinn:** I have to echo what Sara said. I mean, as a doc student, sometimes you feel that the campus is not made for you, and you're on your own island. But this Death Café made me feel

like I belonged because we all shared a similar experience even though we come from such different backgrounds. So thank you all for sharing a part of yourselves with us.

**Olivia:** I want to say that I appreciate you all for your contributions these past few months. You all engaged in some fantastic and thought-provoking topics. So thank you for your dedication to this group and each other. We will end with our usual format by closing out with a word to end our Death Café.

*Olivia pauses and looks around the room.*

**Olivia:** Okay. Well, for the last time for this academic year, would anyone like to start us off with a word that describes how they're feeling?

**Quinn:** At peace. *Quinn looks to Sara.*

**Sara:** Connected.

**Olivia:** Admiration.

**Pepper:** Appreciative.

**Leo:** Grateful.

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone. It was an honor to be your facilitator. You all shared wonderful updates during today's Death Café, and I wish you all nothing but the best moving forward. Before you all leave, I also wanted to share that this is actually going to be my last Death Café at this café. *Gasps are heard in the room.* I just got a fantastic job offer that I couldn't refuse, but it's in another state and I'll actually be moving in a few months.

**Leo:** Congrats, Olivia!

**Pepper:** Yeah, that's wonderful news. Congratulations!

*Smiles and head nods in agreement around the room.*

**Olivia:** Thank you, everyone! I'm excited to start this new journey. With that said, now that you all have experienced a Death Café, if any of you are interested in being a facilitator, I'm happy to share resources with you! If not, please feel free to stay in touch. I'll stick around later if you have any questions. Best of luck as you all finish up the year!

*The Death Café has ended, and everyone lingers around to say their goodbyes with one another, chat with Olivia, and exchange their contact information with each other. Once the last person leaves, Olivia takes one last look around the room and then turns off the light.*

**OLIVIA'S APARTMENT:** Olivia keys into her apartment and cannot stop smiling. As she opens the door, Olivia sees Muffin chewing on her favorite bone.

**Olivia:** Hi, Muffin! *Olivia sits down on the ground and rubs Muffin's belly.* What a fantastic way to end the Death Café. Guess what?

*Muffin rolls over on all fours and tilts her head, looking at Olivia.*

**Olivia:** I told the group about the new job, and how we're moving, and Leo and Pepper talked to me about continuing the Death Café as co-facilitators! How cool is that? *Olivia scratches Muffin behind her ears.* I'm so happy!!!

*Muffin senses the joy from Olivia and starts doing zoomies around the room. Olivia laughs out loud.*

**Olivia:** Yes, thanks for sharing your excitement with me, Muffin.

*Olivia pulls out her phone to video Muffin running around her apartment. Muffin finally takes a break from running in circles to drink water.*

**Olivia:** You know, those two have come so far this semester and have really opened up. They are going to make such great facilitators for next year's group. *Olivia pauses and thinks of the past few months with Leo, Pepper, Sara, and Quin.* And can we talk about the potluck? What a cute way to wrap up the year. Sharing those potluck items was a great way to learn about their loved ones in such a unique and tasty way. I'll definitely have to borrow this idea for future Death Cafés! *Olivia sighs.* It was so wonderful to hear about how much they have all grown since we started the Death Café five months ago. What a great group. I'll never forget them and their stories.

*Muffin comes over to Olivia and starts licking Olivia's arm.*

**Olivia:** *Olivia looks at Muffin.* Okay, good girl. Are you ready for your night walk? Let's go, and then I'll see how many more things I can sort into the donation pile before we start packing up things tomorrow.

*Muffin excitedly heads to the door. Olivia clips on Muffin's leash, and they head out under their stars for their nightly walk.*



## CHAPTER VI. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research study was to better understand and describe how college students are able to academically persist within higher education after a significant death loss. This research topic was inspired by my experiences with death loss, both as an undergraduate and graduate student. I wanted this research study to uplift the voices of bereaved college students who were academically persisting on their college campuses. As an understudied and often hidden population in higher education, I wanted this research study to focus on the educational resilience that enabled these students to persist. Additionally, I created this study to provide a different lens to understanding the bereaved college student experience.

I used narrative inquiry to share the lived experiences of bereaved college students who were in different stages of their educational program. Through two semi-structured interviews and an electronic journaling activity, seven participants from three separate institutions across the United States shared their unique death loss experiences. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to witness the various emotions that participants embodied as they spoke about their loved ones and how their death losses shaped their college experience. In addition to seeing tears and laughter, I observed the frustration, sadness, and gratitude that participants experienced as they shared their stories.

By engaging in the electronic journaling activity, participants allowed me to access their internal discourse. It was through this writing format that participants could reflect upon things that may have felt awkward or uncomfortable to disclose to me during the first interview. Jessica mentioned in her journal that during the first interview, she experienced some expected discomfort from speaking about the context of her friends deaths such as “sweating, slight lump in throat, slight headache.” As someone who had just met Jessica, I had not observed these

reactions during our time together. However, the journaling activity allowed these experiences to surface. It was also in her journal that Jessica acknowledged that her feelings of discomfort dissipated and “quickly gave way to relief as I talked about what changed since then and how I’ve dealt with their passing.” I believe that the journaling activity helped to fill in the gaps from the semi-structured interview.

Both data collection methods were eye-opening because many participants had not allowed themselves to write about or process the death loss that they experienced prior to this study. It was also helpful for me as a researcher to circle back to the topics that were mentioned in the journaling activity during the second semi-structured interview. Each participant opened up about how the death losses shaped their college experience and how they were able to continue with their educational goals. Findings that emerged from this study, including the reactions and reflections from the seven participants, are presented in Chapter V through composite narratives.

In this chapter, I shift away from the composite characters from Chapter V and turn our attention back to the seven participants who we met earlier in Chapter IV: Allison, Claudia, Jessica, Luna, Max, Michelle, and Rokit. I’ll start by discussing the findings that emerged from their narratives by using Schlossberg’s transition theory, which is the theoretical framework that this study was situated within. Based on the findings from this research, I share the implications and limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future research topics to consider. Lastly, this chapter concludes with final thoughts.

## **Discussion**

Schlossberg’s transition theory (1981) provides a useful framework for discussing the participants’ death loss experience and how they were able to deal with change and transition in

their lives. The 4 S's: situation, self, support, and strategies will help to address the following research questions: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face adversity? How does a death loss shape students' experiences of college? What types of support systems do college students use during their bereavement? And, what drives students to continue their educational goals?

### **Situation**

Schlossberg (1981) mentioned that the transition, such as a death loss, is not of primary importance, but rather how the death loss sits with the individual at the time of the transition. The situation and circumstances surrounding the death loss often shaped how participants responded to this type of transition in their life. Topics such as the timing of the death loss, the manner of death, and role changes that followed after the death loss were common areas that participants discussed.

In this study, multiple participants expressed that their death losses occurred during significant or busy times of the year. Allison shared that she had just started her graduate program when she discovered that Jim had passed away. The timing of this death loss ultimately shaped how her colleagues saw her, as *the* bereaved student. This was an identity that Allison also embraced, as she was able to comfort others that experienced a death loss. However, the timing of this death loss also set the tone for the remainder of her time on campus, as cognitive difficulties and mental health issues negatively impacted her academics. Other participants also mentioned that the time of the year of their loved one's passing made it difficult to be a student. Luna said that Charlie had passed away at the end of the semester, which made it difficult since it happened close to exams. Jessica had also shared that her two death losses were both very sudden and relatively close in timing to one another. Additionally, these death losses had

occurred around the time that she was preparing for her qualifying exams, which was stressful. These transitions were challenging for participants who had to navigate a plethora of emotions and obligations while still trying to maintain their good academic standing as a student.

Additionally, some death losses occurred during memorable occasions. Emilio had passed away when Michelle was supposed to be celebrating a friend's bachelorette party. Jessica had also learned about Susan's death as she was heading to spend Thanksgiving with her partner's family. Similarly, Max had experienced his two death losses on significant days. He had lost his great grandmother, Dorris, on Christmas Eve and his grandfather, Bob, on his 21st birthday. Consistent with Osterweis and Townsend's (1998) findings, "holidays, important family events, and the time of the year when the death occurred" (p.4) proved to be emotional times for participants.

Besides the timing of the death, the manner of death in which someone passed away played a significant role in how participants responded to their loved one's deaths. Participants were often triggered by unexpected deaths that occurred by murder or manslaughter, such as when Jessica's friend, Susan, was killed by her boyfriend or when Claudia's cousin, Danny, was shot while he was robbed. In both instances, there was no warning or preparation for their survivors. Due to these sudden and traumatic death losses, participants expressed difficulties with accepting these death losses, which is consistent with the literature review (Cox et al., 2015; Kaltman & Bonnano, 2003; Michael & Snyder, 2007; Prigerson, 2004; Schnider et al., 2007).

When death occurred accidentally by a drug overdose, such as Michelle's friend, Tyrone, and Jessica's friend, James, there were mixed feelings for survivors on what they viewed as a preventable death. However, natural deaths that participants could prepare for, such as Bernard's death, allowed Michelle to say her goodbye in advance. Max also saw Dorris' health decline

over time, which allowed him to prepare for her death. Although these natural death losses were difficult for participants, these incidents were not as disturbing as a sudden and traumatic death losses that others experienced. However, as mentioned in the literature review, even anticipated deaths may not prepare individuals for the feelings that come after the death loss (Staudacher, 1987).

Multiple participants expressed that the people who died often left behind loved ones, including partners and young children. Individuals such as Tyrone, Emilio, and Danny left behind young children, which made it even more heart-wrenching for Michelle and Claudia as they thought about what their families were going to go through. Michelle even stepped in to help her good friend, Tyrone's wife, watch their child when Tyrone passed. Death losses also changed the roles and responsibilities of survivors. Although the death losses of both his Nana and uncle Raymond were somber events, this meant that Rokit no longer had to serve as a caretaker, which was a role that he carried for a large portion of his doctoral studies. In the literature review, Becvar (2001) mentioned: "sadness about the loss, gratitude that suffering has ended for the dying person, relief that there will now be a respite for the caregivers, and guilt about what are perfectly normal, if mixed reactions" (p. 12). These emotions are very similar to the feelings that Rokit expressed. Although Rokit experienced a deep loss and was emotional about his death losses, he also expressed that a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

## **Self**

Participant's personal and demographic characteristics often became a point of discussion during our time together. One finding that was prevalent throughout this study was how an individual's socioeconomic status shaped their bereavement experience. Participants such as Claudia, Jessica, and Max did not always have the funds to attend the funeral or other similar

services for their loved ones, especially if it took place in a different state or country. Not attending these events, or delaying these visits, often prevented them from receiving the in-person closure and time with family and friends that they desired. Instead, these individuals found a way to acknowledge, pay their respect, and reflect on their lost loved one by talking with those who also knew the deceased and could help them to process the death loss. Michelle disclosed that she did not have to worry about finances during her bereavement. Expenses were covered before, during, and after the death loss of Tyrone and Emilio, thanks to Joey and his family. Michelle acknowledged that this privilege helped her to manage these events better because she did not have to worry about finances and could focus on herself and her loved ones.

Benefit finding, which is when the bereaved find meaning or positive outcomes from the death loss (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), was present for multiple participants including Jessica. Jessica wrote in her journal, “I think these deaths shaped my college experience in that they pushed me to appreciate the relationships I do have and the moments I have with my loved ones, which in turn motivates me to balance school and life.” As a result, Jessica prioritized these relationships by spending time with friends on the weekend, and either calling or traveling to visit her partner when it was financially feasible. She explained that part of the anxiousness that she developed following her death losses helped her to prioritize spending time with her loved ones before they are gone.

Luna also experienced benefit finding after Charlie passed away. Charlie had been such a cheerleader for Luna and her studies. When he died, Luna wanted to perform well in school because of how much Charlie believed in her, which helped her to continue with her educational goals. Charlie’s death also positively inspired Luna in a number of ways. His funeral and burial service opened Luna’s eyes to the large impact that Charlie had on others, and this encouraged

her to want to connect with others more socially and academically. His death also helped to shape Luna's career trajectory because she began taking an interest in a counseling degree to help others.

Religion and spirituality also came up during some participant's death loss experience. Individuals such as Max, Jessica, and Michelle valued and leaned into their faith, and expressed comfort after their death losses because their faith let them know that their loved ones were going to be okay. This was consistent with findings from Lattanzi-Licht (2013), who mentioned that religion and spirituality could comfort individuals who are near death as well as provide peace to family and friends. However, Allison's religious beliefs caused her grief because according to her faith, her inability to move on after Jim's death was preventing him from progressing in the afterlife. This conundrum left Allison troubled and continued to make her bereavement process more difficult.

### **Support**

Participants in this study acknowledged the people in their lives who supported and comforted them during this trying time. Max reflected in his journal that through his death losses, he realized "how lucky I am to have the support structure that I have." Family members, partners, friends, and people within their institution all played significant roles in helping participants to process the loss of a loved one. Consistent with findings from the literature review, many participants had support systems from their home town, rather than their institution (Balk et al., 1998). These support systems often knew the person who died, and the solidarity between the participants and these individuals helped them to reminisce about the past. Support came in the form of individuals offering a listening ear, checking in to see how they were doing,

and for those that were local, providing space away from campus for them to connect with others or to allow them to be with their thoughts.

As mentioned in Chapter II, Osterweis and Townsend (1988) speculated that although bereaved individuals typically receive support immediately following the death loss, this support tends to decline over time when it may be needed most. This was the case for Allison. During the semester of Jim's death loss, Allison's faculty provided her with academic flexibility by offering extensions, which is consistent with typical academic accommodations for bereaved students (Balk, 2001; Battle et al., 2013; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). However, Allison said that the following semester, her faculty expected her to perform at a certain level, as if nothing had happened, which she felt was abrupt. Unfortunately Allison was not able to meet her faculty's expectations and was dismissed from her program.

Allison struggled to connect with the peers in her cohort. Although her peers tried to support her following Jim's death, their gestures angered rather than comforted her, which aligns with Balk's (2001) finding that not all individuals have the skills that are necessary to talk with someone who has experienced a death loss. Allison viewed invitations to go drinking to be inappropriate. She also found that when people shared that they had also lost a grandparent, that they were being dismissive of her relationship with Jim, since he was her father-figure. Her peers unintentionally dismissing the significance of Jim's death is a common example of when peers do more harm than good when interacting with their bereaved peers (Balk, 2001; Balk, 2008; Balk & Vesta, 1998; Battle et al., 2013).

Other intended acts of support from Allison's peers, such as the sympathy card, potted plant, and a Chipotle gift card was ill-received because that was not the type of support that Allison wanted or needed at that time. "The compassion that my classmates were trying to show



me was not what I wanted, and it was the wrong kind of thing at the wrong time.” Unlike Servaty-Seib and Taub’s (2010) statement that some bereaved individuals are not able to effectively communicate their needs to others, Allison made it clear that she wished that her peers would have validated her feelings and responded to her request to have someone study with her. Unfortunately no one from her cohort offered to study with Allison, and she had to try to organize study sessions with other people at her institution. The lack of peer support Allison received contributed to the challenges that she experienced at her institution.

### **Strategies**

Wayman (2002) mentioned that a “willingness to work hard, healthy self-concept, educational aspirations, and motivation are among the personal factors believed to be associated with educational resilience” (p. 168). However, as noted earlier, Balk (2007) stressed that resilience does not necessarily denote a positive outcome, but rather a return to baseline functioning. Allison, for example, met all the requirements for this study, but felt that she had not academically persisted. She had been dismissed from her intended graduate program, but was able to successfully pass with enough credits to eventually graduate with a master’s degree from her institution. In other words, educational resilience meant how participants were able to academically perform and show up as they had prior to the death loss. Therefore, although many participants were not able to thrive following their death loss due to a number of obstacles, participants were able to survive at their institution by making small academic achievements that either allowed them to graduate or set them on the path to be eligible to graduate.

Multiple strategies were used by participants to help them during their bereavement. Participants like Luna, Max, and Jessica chose to adhere to a strict schedule, mainly focusing on their academics. Maintaining a regimented schedule was something that they had power and

control over and proved to be an effective way to distract themselves from their death loss. This supports Servaty-Seib and Taub's (2010) finding that some bereaved students channel their energy towards their academics as a form of distraction.

Another strategy that helped participants to academically persist was not to lose sight of their goals. Claudia refused to let her advisor and graduate officer counsel her out of her doctorate by only getting a master's degree. Claudia made it clear that she did not sacrifice so much not to complete her Ph.D. Similarly, part of Jessica's drive to continue with her studies was to remember the reasons why she started her graduate program in the first place, to become a faculty member. Allison also did not give up on her goals. After being dismissed from her program, she continued to accumulate academic credits, which allowed her to graduate with a master's degree.

Many participants in this study mentioned that the motive for them to persist with their education was not only for themselves but for others as well. Luna said that she wanted to succeed because of Charlie, her hype man. She recalled conversations that she had with Charlie when he would tell her that she could do and accomplish anything. Therefore, Luna wanted to academically succeed because of how much Charlie had believed in her. Allison's motivation for doing well in her studies was so that she could help Jim transition in the afterlife so that he would not have to worry about her anymore. Max also shared that he wanted to do well in his studies to honor his grandfather, who valued academics and being a good student. Rokit mentioned that he wanted to finish his dissertation as a thank you to Profe Dylan, who helped him both personally and academically during his studies. For Michelle, she said that she wanted to get her doctorate so that her family could have a better life. These various motivations helped participants to persist in their studies.

Lastly, participants had mixed reviews about whether or not engaging in mental health services was a productive strategy. Unlike the literature review that suggested that college students are hesitant to use mental health services due to the stigma associated with it (Balk, 2011) or due to ethnic and cultural reasons (Balk, 2011; Neimeyer et al., 2006), Claudia and Jessica were worried whether engaging in these services would be detrimental to their academic progress. During her interview, Claudia said:

I felt like if I drained myself and you know, my emotions, I guess, during that time, that I would lose time. But then again, I don't know if I should have given myself that time to really, I don't know, process or I don't know. I don't even know what's the correct amount of time to, I guess, really grieve a person.

Although Jessica mentioned that she regretted not using mental health services, she said that at the time, she did not want to take a break from anything. She continued saying:

I thought talking about it with someone officially would've made it too, more of a big deal, or would have like sucked me deeper into a sadness about it, even though sadness existed. So, I didn't. And it could have maybe healed me a little faster or just, you know, been a helpful thing to talk it through [at the time].

Claudia and Jessica chose to not use mental health services as part of their own strategy for academic success. Although Jessica said that her mental health continues to be an issue for her following the death losses, she feels that she has been able focus her energy in her school work. It should be noted that everyone who experiences a death loss does not need counseling. Individuals not only need to be ready and open to the experience, but they also need to be able to access these resources in order to use them. Therefore, individuals need to determine what would work best for them based on their situations. Both Claudia and Jessica had a strong support

network with their friends, family members, and partners to help them process their experiences. Although they had not used mental health services at the time that they were interviewed, both shared that they may use that resource in the future.

In contrast to Claudia and Jessica's views about using mental health services, Allison, Luna, Rokit, and Michelle shared throughout the study that they had experienced the beneficial aspects of talking with someone, especially when they were able to be paired with someone with whom they connected. Allison and Luna had experience using mental health services prior to their death losses. However, Rokit and Michelle began to see someone after their death losses and found their visits to be helpful. Peer support helped Rokit to seek support from his campus. Rokit shared that his friends within his cohort had first-hand experiences of using counselors on campus and encouraged him to look into it. Hearing the positive experiences that his friends shared and learning that there were counselors who reflected Rokit's identities helped him to take those first steps of engaging with counseling. Michelle was also able to find a counselor who shared her same identities and experiences as a scholar. As Michelle stated, her therapist helped her to open up about her death loss experience without being "a blubbering mess."

### **Implications for Practice**

Narratives from this study offer implications for practice to better support bereaved college students. From the insights that I have gained from this narrative inquiry, I offer three implications for campus faculty and staff to improve the experiences of bereaved college students. The implications for practice that I describe below include: (1) the role of faculty members and how they respond and mentor their bereaved students; (2) offering resources such as emergency travel funding for bereaved students; and (3) institutions providing a support center for bereaved students.

## **Faculty Response and Mentorship**

Balk (2001) stated that bereaved students find few people in the university who are able to acknowledge the significance of their death loss. Therefore, faculty members play a crucial role in the bereaved college student experience and their response and actions with a bereaved student is of great importance. What mattered most to the participants in this study was having a faculty mentor who valued their academic success and cared about their overall well-being.

As mentioned in Chapter IV, Claudia did not have a strong relationship with her advisor, and they rarely had time to see one another. Instead of personally reaching out to Claudia out of concern to address the decline in her academic performance, her advisor scheduled a meeting with Claudia and a graduate officer to coach her out of her program. This was not the type of response that Claudia found to be helpful. She wished that her advisor would have invested in her and shared campus resources that would have better supported her. It was not until Claudia found another faculty mentor who personally took an interest in her and her academic success that she began to make strides in her program. This new faculty member made time to meet with Claudia during crucial milestones in her program and asked Claudia how she was doing on a personal level. “She’s been a great mentor. I feel like she cares about my needs, my feelings.” This drastic shift in how a faculty responded to her helped Claudia to persist in her graduate program.

Rokit was another participant who spoke about how his faculty member, Profe Dylan, helped him to persist in his studies. In addition to being an expert in his field of study, Profe Dylan always treated Rokit like a person first, before he treated him like a student. After Rokit’s death losses, Profe Dylan not only shared his own death loss experience that Rokit could relate to, but he stressed the importance of Rokit taking care of himself and encouraged Rokit to invest

time away from his studies to focus on his family. This caring response helped Rokit to take a few weeks off to take care of his personal affairs without guilt, and return to finish his doctoral degree. Rokit reflected in his journal that this research took him back to the exact moment when he realized, “Wow, my faculty mentor, he truly understands. He truly gets it. I am not alone.”

Michelle shared both positive and negative experiences with faculty members following her death losses. She shared that one particular faculty member was more concerned about the academic presentation that she was going to give in Washington, D.C., rather than what she was personally going through: “They were more concerned about me doing a good job of the talk than my well-being at the time.” Although Michelle did not feel supported by this faculty member, she did speak about how another faculty member’s response helped her to academically persist in her program. Michelle had not been performing well in her Gender Studies class and one day she disclosed to her faculty member that she was dealing with the break-up with her long-term partner on top of her death loss experiences. The faculty member was empathetic and told Michelle that she knew that she understood the course material because even though her assignments were not complete, Michelle would participate in the class discussion. Therefore, this faculty member let Michelle’s final be her overall grade, which allowed her to stay in good standing with the university. This compassionate rather than punitive decision by that faculty member allowed Michelle to continue with her doctoral studies.

These three examples demonstrate that faculty members who treated bereaved students as holistic beings, with complex, multifaceted lives, helped their students be successful. Therefore, I recommend that faculty members mentor and engage with their bereaved students beyond their student role by responding to them with care and compassion. In practice, this could be making time to meet with students to have a genuine conversation to see what they are going through and

what they needed, sharing personal experiences and wisdom, or looking past an academic grade to see someone's potential.

Faculty members who had previously navigated death losses, such as Profe Danny, were able to connect with their students based on personal experiences. However, it would be beneficial for all faculty members to receive training on how to support bereaved college students. This training could be a part of faculty orientation as well as an on-going training series that is offered by their institution. For instance, one of the findings from this study was that relationships between students and the deceased were not always accurately defined by the title of the relationship. Therefore, trainings could provide recommendations on how faculty can engage in empathetic listening and how to offer academic accommodations so that they meet students where they are. This may mean re-examining the language in the syllabus regarding absences and academic accommodations to think beyond traditional definitions of family and be inclusive of various death loss experiences that are significant to students.

Empathetic listening could also alert faculty members, as well as other members on campus, to whether bereaved students are surviving or thriving following a significant death loss. As mentioned earlier, resilience is a continuum and an individual who adapts well in one arena in their life may fail to adapt well in other areas (Southwick et al., 2014). For example, a bereaved student may slip under the radar, because although they may be getting passing grades, they may be struggling with their mental health. Connecting with students and exercising empathetic listening skills can help members from across campus to listen to, understand, and offer resources to bereaved students who may need some additional support.

### **Emergency Travel Funding for Bereaved Students**

Bereaved students who attended higher education away from their family and friends experienced various challenges due to the geographical separation (Schnider et al., 2007). Michelle, Max, Jessica, and Allison had departed loved ones who were located in a different state from where they were, and both of Claudia's death losses occurred in a different country. However, only individuals with the financial means to travel were able to be with their loved ones leading up to and after the death. My recommendation is for colleges and universities to offer emergency travel funding for bereaved students that are: (1) not based on a relationship title; (2) culturally sensitive; and (3) inclusive of pre-death and post-death travel. Not all participants had the financial means to travel immediately due to the lack of funds in their bank accounts. To address this issue, I would recommend that students be offered the option to be provided funds in advance or to be reimbursed at a later time.

Allowing students to apply for emergency travel funding related to a death loss would be helpful in removing the financial barriers that prevent bereaved students from being with their loved ones during their final moments. Based on the findings of this study, it is imperative that these funds not be limited based on one's title, but rather inclusive of the relationship that exists. This would support the travel for students such as Allison, who considered Jim as "the only father-figure I ever had."

Kalish (1990) said that one's culture and background might inform several death loss practices, including handling the body of the deceased to various funeral and burial rituals. In her journaling activity, Michelle wrote, "[my] cultural and spiritual values helped me through the grieving process as well as staying on track with my studies and research." Therefore, I would suggest that emergency travel funding not restrict people from applying based on the length of



time since the death loss or how frequently someone might need to travel, because certain customs have specific mourning practices (Lopez, 2011; Parks, 1987).

Related to being culturally sensitive, I would also recommend that the emergency travel funds be used towards both pre-death loss and post-death loss visits. With an anticipated death loss, students could have some time to spend time with their loved one before they die. However, visiting after a death loss has occurred is also important for many individuals to grieve and mourn with loved ones. It has also proved to be meaningful for participants such as Luna, who was able to experience benefit finding by attending Charlie's funeral service. "[I saw] how many people he helped through his business, and just his friend group and his life and everything."

### **Support Center for Bereaved Students**

Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) suggested that some bereaved individuals are not able to effectively communicate their needs to others. Some participants in this study did effectively communicate their needs to others because they did not know what resources were available to them, let alone what their needs were. Claudia mentioned in her interview, "But I didn't know, or I still don't know I guess, of other resources to go to if things like this happen." Luna also said, "I think whenever someone says resources, I always automatically go to like the counseling center." Since not all bereaved students know where to go for support, my recommendation is that institutions create a support center for bereaved students that focuses on resources, education, and advocacy.

A support center for bereaved students could serve as a resource hub. Even though Claudia knew that counseling and psychological services existed on her campus, she did not realize that she could use it as a resource during her bereavement. Therefore, a support center would be one way to have a centralized place for bereaved students to go to following a death

loss. Staff members from the support center could serve as case managers and connect bereaved students with resources such as mental health services, financial aid, academic assistance, and information about religious and faith-based groups.

Having a support center would allow bereaved students to see the variety of options that are available to them so that they are able to make the best informed decision for themselves. For instance, both Claudia and Jessica chose not to use mental health services. Claudia thought that it might be too time consuming and bring up unwanted emotions. Jessica chose to not use these services because she did not want to take a break from anything. Having a support center would allow students to connect with people who can share with them that investing in yourself, whether that is engaging in counseling or taking some time away from school, may actually be beneficial and needed in some cases.

Balk (2001) suggested that colleges and universities provide “training programs built around the fundamental concepts of empathy, attentive listening, and awareness of the phenomena of grief” (p. 76). Allison shared that although her classmates intended to comfort her after Jim died, their actions were more frustrating than helpful for her. “The compassion that my classmates were trying to show me was not what I wanted, and it was the wrong kind of thing at the wrong time.” With that said, the support center could become an educational destination where the campus community, including faculty members, administrators, and students could attend various orientations and on-going workshops to increase their awareness, develop their skills, as well as identify and implement strategies to better support bereaved students. Learning that the depth and significance of relationships are not always encompassed by titles could help to encourage policy changes across campus such as academic accommodations from faculty

members to workplace and student experience considerations from administrators such as accommodation requests for mandatory trainings, meetings, and interviews.

Lastly, a support center could help bereaved students with how to advocate for themselves. A number of participants in this study expressed a fear that taking time to care for themselves, such as taking a leave of absence, would negatively impact their academic standing or funding. This is why many participants chose not to ask for any accommodations. As mentioned in the literature review, asking for these types of accommodations may be complicated due to “pressures to complete coursework on schedule, and concerns about additional costs of extending one’s time in achieving a degree” (Battle et al., 2013). Staff from the support center could help bereaved students to connect with their department to better understand their leave of absence policy, and assist them with securing funding opportunities so that they are provided with the means to continue their education.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Similar to most research, limitations were present in this study and it is important to acknowledge how they influenced the findings. The limitations in this manuscript include participant selection and member checks.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants needed to meet specific requirements to be eligible for this study. Participants must have (1) been at least 18 years old; (2) experienced a death loss that was significant to them while they enrolled; (3) experienced their death loss at least two years ago prior to the start of the study; and (4) maintained a 2.0 or higher term and cumulative GPA since the death loss. Additionally, the participant from the West regional institution needed to take the Beck Depression Inventory, which is an inventory for measuring depression (Beck et al., 1961)

and scored 1-10, which indicates that they fell within a reasonable range of depression. They also needed to fill out an interested subject questionnaire (see Appendix A) where they answered a one-page document to ensure that they met the requirements of the study. Although the seven participants from this study offered diverse death loss experiences and were at different stages of their educational journey, I noticed that certain groups of students such as veterans, international students, and parents were not a part of this study. I believe that students that belong to these groups could offer a lot of rich information about their experience as bereaved college students. Perhaps I could have provided additional outreach to these groups of students if I had thought about this during the marketing and advertising phase of my study to get a more diverse participant group.

### **Member Checks**

Another limitation of this study was that one of the participants, Allison, did not respond to my outreach (email and phone call) after the second semi-structured interview. I had attempted to reach out to Allison regarding her response that she did not see herself as academically persisting, since this did not align with the focus of this study. I had hoped that she would be willing to talk about this in more depth to expand upon that comment. Unfortunately, I did not hear back from Allison. As a reminder, the purpose of this research study was to better understand and describe how college students are able to academically persist within higher education after a loss due to death. Since I view the world through a constructivist paradigm, I wanted to honor Allison's narrative by viewing her as an expert of her story. After consulting with my advisors, we decided to have Allison remain in this manuscript, because she shared valuable information about her experience as a bereaved college student. However, her lack of response remains a limitation in this study.

### **Implications for Future Research**

To expand upon this study, I recommend that future research examine the experiences of bereaved college students who are studying abroad. I did not have any international students engage in this study. However, my participant, Claudia, experienced multiple significant death losses that occurred in a different country. As mentioned in Chapter II, culture plays such a significant role in how one responds to death, and students who attend higher education further from their family and friends may have difficulties since their support system may not be readily available (Schnider et al., 2007). The complexities that arise from experiencing a death loss while traveling in a foreign country have seldom been explored. Studying this specific population could provide critical information for campus communities to consider as they provide intentional programs, policies, and resources that address the needs of international students.

Balk (2008) stated that bereaved students who end up seeking help from mental health services are typically the exception rather than the rule. Claudia and Jessica feared that using mental health services would bring up unwanted emotions that would prolong their academic progress. I recommend future research on the experiences of bereaved college students who choose to invest their time toward their mental health, which could include stopping out or taking time to get the help that is beneficial or necessary. . It would be valuable to learn if these self-care strategies have any impact on degree completion and degree completion timelines.

Additionally, I recommend future research to examine bereaved college students' time to graduation. Many participants from this study mentioned that their death loss experience prolonged their time in their studies and affected their time to degree. Future studies could

compare bereaved college students with their non-bereaved peers to determine whether or not there is a difference in time to graduation. Additionally, if delays in education occurred, to examine what impact, if any, does this have on debt, job placement, and potential earnings.

Finally, although this study focused on the death loss of human beings, future research studies may also benefit from including the narratives of bereaved college students who have lost their pet animals due to death. Although there were participants in this study who had expressed that they had experienced a significant death loss of their pets, I reminded participants that this study focused specifically on the death loss of human beings. According to the 2019-2020 survey conducted by American Pet Products Association, 67% of families in the United States report having pets, which is roughly 84.9 million homes. As pets become more incorporated into the lives of humans (Lufkin, 2018), studying the death loss of animals may provide important insights, especially when working with students who rely on emotional support animals and service animals on college campuses.

### **Conclusion**

When I first started this research, I was uncertain how I would recruit participants to share such deep and personal experiences with me regarding their death loss experience. What I found particularly interesting was that bereaved college students were interested in this study and wanted to contribute their stories to this research. Although some participants admitted that they were nervous to talk about their death loss experiences, they were willing to be vulnerable and share their raw emotions. Multiple participants mentioned that there were not a lot of opportunities for them to read about or discuss these types of experiences in their daily lives, which is what drew them to this study. This aligns with Balk (2001) who stated that “bereaved students find few if any persons in the university willing to mention the death, to acknowledge

the importance of this event in the student's life, or to recognize the significance for the griever of the person who died" (p. 75).

Due to the nature of this study, I advertised that I would be financially compensating individuals who were selected for this study for the time that they would be engaging in this research. However, many participants had forgotten that they were going to receive \$75.00 cash for their participation. Their main intention for joining this study was not for the money, but rather to share their experience. As one participant, Michelle, noted, "What you're doing is so important. Please keep going. People need to know how students are affected by grief and loss in different ways so that we can be more thoughtful about how we comfort and care for them."

As a scholar who was closely tied to this research's topic, I had participated in the same interview questions and journaling activity that my participants engaged with, prior to conducting this study. The main areas that I focused on were: (1) dissertation slump; (2) counseling; and (3) support from my parents and friends. It was validating to hear my experiences mirrored by the participants in this study. Prior to this research, I had never spoken to any of my peers about this subject matter. However, it is comforting to know that others had gone through a similar experience and even though we had experienced some challenges along our journey, we were all thriving in our own way.

By combing through the semi-structured interviews and electronic journaling entries, I discovered that as much as this manuscript was part of my own healing process, my participants also gained a lot of great insights as they reflected upon what they had gone through and the successes that they experienced since their death losses. Claudia wrote in her journal that by participating in this study, she realized that she should "not feel ashamed of my experience and to embrace the fact that I have been able to overcome obstacles and still continue my journey in

graduate school.” Providing a space to talk with Luna about her death losses helped her to realize “that it’s okay to talk more about it.” Rokit also shared, “I think this interview was the first step in engaging in critical reflection, which for me is necessary in developing a testimonial of healing and resiliency.”

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to better understand and describe how college students are able to academically persist within higher education after a death loss. Participants in this study demonstrated that a variety of personal and environmental factors helped them to be educationally resilient after losing someone significant to them due to death. Although the information that was gathered from this study supported various experiences of bereaved individuals as demonstrated by the literature review presented in Chapter II, the findings from this study also highlighted unique narratives that continue to add to the scholarship on bereaved college students. I hope that through the participant’s narratives and implications for practice, more awareness and positive change can be implemented to support bereaved college students and help them to academically persist throughout their educational journey.



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## APPENDIX A. INTERESTED SUBJECT QUESTIONNAIRE

Participants must meet the following requirements to be eligible to participate in this study. Please indicate whether or not you meet these requirements.

Statement	Yes	No
I am at least 18 years old		
I have experienced a death loss of an individual that was significant to me while enrolled in college		
The death loss I experienced occurred at least two years ago		
I have maintained a 2.0 cumulative GPA or higher since the death loss		
I have scored between 1-10 (these ups and downs are considered normal) on Beck's Depression Inventory		

**Please explain the relationship that you had with the individual(s) you lost:**

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**Was the death loss expected, unexpected, or other?** Expected    Unexpected    Other

**How would you describe the following aspects of your identity?**

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_ Nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Religious and/or Spiritual Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

**Interested Subject Contact Information**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please email this form to [curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu) if you are interested in participating in a Narrative Study of the Academic Persistence of Bereaved College Students that is being conducted by Cari Ann Urabe during the 2017-2018 academic year.*

## APPENDIX B. INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

**AN INVITATION FOR COLLEGE  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE  
EXPERIENCED A LOSS DUE TO  
DEATH (DEATH LOSS)**

**SINCE ARRIVING AT [INSTITUTION X],  
HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED A DEATH  
LOSS THAT OCCURRED AT LEAST TWO  
YEARS AGO?**

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING  
IN A CONFIDENTIAL RESEARCH STUDY  
ABOUT DEATH LOSS AND ACADEMIC  
PERSISTENCE THAT IS BEING CONDUCTED  
BY A BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY  
DOCTORAL STUDENT IN THE HIGHER  
EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM,  
PLEASE CONTACT CARI ANN URABE AT  
CURABE@BGSU.EDU FOR MORE  
INFORMATION.

## APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MESSAGE



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Higher Education and Student Affairs  
330 Education Building  
Bowling Green, OH 43403

### Narrative Study of the Academic Persistence of Bereaved College Students

Has it been two or more years since you have experienced a death loss of someone significant to you since enrolling at [REDACTED]? Have you continued with your studies with a 2.0 term and cumulative grade point average (GPA) or higher after experiencing the death loss? Would you be willing to share your story about the death loss you experienced and how you academically persisted? If so, you may be able to help in an important research study.

My name is Cari Ann Urabe and I am the Assistant Director of Upper Division and Themed Living for Residential Education and Housing Services at [REDACTED]. I am also a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University. This research study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy.

This study will focus on the narratives of bereaved college students that have academically persisted in the face of adversity. I am interested in learning about you as a person, hearing about your life story, and understanding your experiences as a college student.

By participating in this research study, you will benefit by having the opportunity to express yourself and share your personal story around death loss and academic persistence with someone that is open and interested in your life story. This may not have been a topic that you have had an opportunity to share with others previously, so this study will also allow subjects to reflect upon and process information about themselves and their experience. Additionally, your participation will assist me in creating a strengths-based perspective on the bereaved college student experience. Most scholarship on bereaved college students tends to focus on negative outcomes that arise from a death loss. Your narrative will contribute to the existing literature on an understudied population and will help the campus community to better understand how to support bereaved college students.

As a subject in this research study, your involvement will take place during the 2017-2018 academic school year. This will include an initial two-hour interview, a 15-minute journaling activity that you will complete on your own, and a final two-hour interview. I will then email you the transcripts from our two interviews, and you will have the opportunity to send me your feedback. Next, I will email you the preliminary analyses, interpretations, and conclusions from

the study. You will have two weeks to provide your feedback and insights in person or by email. Any feedback that I receive will be incorporated into the final manuscript. The total anticipated time that you would be contributing to this research study is approximately seven hours.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete Beck's Depression Inventory and fill out the Interested Subject Questionnaire and email it to [curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu). Individuals who meet the qualifications for this research will be selected for this study based on the overall diversity of the group. I will contact you within a few weeks of your submission to let you know whether you have been selected to participate.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this research study, you can contact me at [curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu) or 808-277-4691. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Maureen E. Wilson at [mewilso@bgsu.edu](mailto:mewilso@bgsu.edu) or 419-372-7382. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at Bowling Green State University by calling 419-372-7716 or emailing them at [orc@bgsu.edu](mailto:orc@bgsu.edu).

Thank you for your consideration.

All the best,

Cari Ann Urabe  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Higher Education Administration  
Bowling Green State University

## APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Subject Name:

### Procedures Before the Interview

- Welcome and introductions
- Review the Informed Consent Form
- Provide an overview of the first interview
- Receive permission from the participant to record the interview
- Turn on the recorder

### Questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself
  - a. Where are you from?
  - b. Why are/were you interested in going to college? Does this fit into your future goals?
  - c. What year/level are you in college? How did you choose this institution?
  - d. What are you studying? How did you decide upon that?
  - e. Are you involved in any co-curricular activities?
  - f. How would your friends and family members describe you?
2. What was your relationship to the person that you lost to death?
  - a. How long did you know them?
  - b. Can you share one of your favorite memories about this person?
3. Can you please share with me information about the death loss you experienced?
  - a. When did this happen?
  - b. What happened?
    - i. Were you anticipating this death loss?
      - What made you anticipate this? (i.e. death of a grandparent or death of a sibling due to a disease).
      - How was it for you to know about the approaching death loss?
    - ii. Was this death loss unexpected for you? (i.e. accidental death of a peer)?
  - c. Where were you when this happened?
4. *Check in with the subject to see how they are doing.*
  - a. *Inform them that participation in this research is voluntary and that they can choose to leave at any time without penalty or explanation.*
5. What was your previous experience with a death loss?
6. How did you react to this death loss?
  - a. What types of support systems did you use, if any?
  - b. Were you surprised by your reaction? (i.e. a specific way of grieving, not showing emotion, etc.)? Please explain.

7. *Check in with the subject to see how they are doing.*
  - a. *Inform them that participation in this research is voluntary and that they can choose to leave at any time without penalty or explanation.*
8. How has this death loss shaped your college experience?
  - a. What was it like to be on campus the semester of the death loss? What was it like to be on campus following the death loss?
    - i. Can you please explain if the death loss altered your participation in certain events? (i.e. social activities, any relationships with others, involvement in co-curricular activities, etc.)?
    - ii. Where did you think you invested your energy after returning to campus (i.e. academics, co-curricular, family, relationships, other)?
9. Who did you share information about the death loss with? What was your relationship to them?
  - a. How was their reaction?
  - b. What did he/she/they do that was helpful?
  - c. What did he/she/they do that was hurtful?
  - d. Is there anyone you intentionally withheld this information from? If so, why do you think that was?
10. Did you know about the resources that were available to you on your campus? If so, how did you hear about these resources?
  - a. Did you use any resources on your campus (i.e. Counseling center, bereavement groups, religiously affiliated groups, staff, resident advisors, other student leaders, etc.)?
  - b. Did you seek out any academic assistance? (i.e. Spoke to faculty, asked for extensions, etc.)?
  - c. How were those experience(s) for you?
11. Could you describe what kind of student you were before the death loss?
12. Could you please describe what kind of student you were after the death loss?
  - a. Were there any challenges that you encountered with your academics after the death loss (i.e. financial hardships, family issues, lack of concentration, motivation)?
  - b. Were there any academic successes that you encountered after the death loss (i.e. increased inspiration or motivation, additional support groups, etc.)?
13. *Check in with the subject to see how they are doing.*
  - a. *Inform them that participation in this research is voluntary and that they can choose to leave at any time without penalty or explanation.*
14. What drove you to continue with your educational goals?
  - a. Is there anything or anyone that you attribute this to?
15. Have you experienced adversity before? If so, how did you respond to those hardships in this past?
  - a. How is this similar/different from how you responded with your academic goals?
  - b. Why do you think this was similar/different?
16. Is there anything that you think colleges can do better to support bereaved students?
17. How has this death loss shaped you as a person?
  - a. Did anything change for you? (i.e. religious/spiritual beliefs, career goals, relationship with others, etc.).



- b. Is there anything you think you have learned from experiencing this death loss?
18. Are there any additional stories or insights that you would like to share with me?

**Procedures After the Interview**

- Thank the subject for sharing
- Turn off the recorder
- Discuss the journaling activity to be completed by the second interview
- Discuss details regarding the next meeting

## APPENDIX E. ELECTRONIC JOURNALING ACTIVITY

Date:

Subject Name:

**Electronic Journal Activity Instructions**

This journal activity is to be completed on your own time after your first interview. You will have 15 minutes to type anything that comes to your mind about the death loss you experienced and how that has shaped your college student experience. If you are not sure what to write about, you may respond to the prompts provided below. Please be sure to either print and bring your journaling activity with you to your second interview or email it to [curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu).

- What interview questions or conversation (if any) do you continue to think about since our last interview?
- Is there anything that you wish I had asked you the last time we met?
- Is there anything that you held back from discussing? Either way, why do you think that is?
- Was there anything that came up during our first interview that surprised you?
- What have you personally gotten out of participating in this research study?

## APPENDIX F. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Subject Name:

### Procedures Before the Interview

- Welcome
- Receive permission from the subject to record the interview
- Turn on the recorder

### Interview Questions

1. Please explain what it meant for you to be a bereaved college student on your college campus.
2. *Check in with the subject to see how they are doing.*
  - a. *Inform them that participation in this research is voluntary and that they can choose to leave at any time without penalty or explanation.*
3. What would you like faculty and staff to know about how to support and interact with students who have experienced a death loss?
4. What do you wish college students knew about how to support and interact with their bereaved peers?
5. How would you describe an effective program or service for bereaved students on college campuses?
6. After reflecting on the individuals who you encountered after the death loss...
  - a. Please share any stories about what went well
  - b. Please share any stories about experiences that could have gone better
  - c. What makes these stories stand out to you?
7. What do you think helped you persist with your academics after the death loss?
  - a. What qualities, characteristics, and or skills do you believe helped you to persist?
8. Now that you have had a chance to meet with me one-on-one, what do you think you are taking away from being part of this study?
9. Would you like to share any other stories, insights, or experiences with me about your college and death loss experience with me during this final interview?

### Procedures After the Interview

- Thank the subject for sharing
- Turn off the recorder
- Reconfirm the subject's contact information for member checking
- Discuss next steps

## APPENDIX G. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT SUBJECTS

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Maureen E. Wilson

Principal Investigator: Cari Ann Urabe

Title of research project: Death, Transition, and Resilience: A Narrative Study of the Academic Persistence of Bereaved College Students

I acknowledge that on \_\_\_\_\_, I was informed by Cari Ann Urabe, Assistant Director of Upper Division and Themed Living at Occidental College and doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Bowling Green State University of the following research project, the way it will be conducted, and the conditions of my participation in it.

### Researcher

Cari Ann Urabe is a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University. She also works at Occidental College as the Assistant Director for Upper Division and Themed Living in Residential Education and Housing Services. This research study is being conducted for her doctoral dissertation. Cari Ann Urabe's advisor, Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, Chair/Professor in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University, is supervising this study.

### Purpose of The Research Project

The purpose of this research is to better understand and describe how college students are able to academically persist within higher education after a loss due to death (referred to as a death loss in this study). In this study, academically persisting is defined as maintaining a 2.0 or higher term and cumulative grade point average (GPA). The researcher will focus on the lived-experiences of college students that have experienced a death loss that occurred at least two years ago since they started at Occidental College.

This study is worthy of being studied because although nearly 60 percent of college students will experience a significant death loss of someone they care about during their educational journey (Cox, Dean, & Kowalski, 2015), bereaved college students continue to be an understudied group (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010; Sklar & Hartley, 1990). The scholarship that has been produced on this topic has been written from a deficit perspective, focusing on the negative outcomes that college students experience following a death loss (Balk, 2008; Balk, 2011; Balk, Tyson-Rawson, Colleti-Wetzel, 2001; Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010; Battle, Greer, Ortiz-Hernandez, & Todd, 2013; Bonanno, 2005; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007).

This research aims to provide a resilience-based approach on this topic by acknowledging the academic successes that bereaved college students have achieved. Using educational resilience as the conceptual model and Schlossberg's theory of transition as the theoretical framework, the overarching research question that will guide this study is: What are the narratives of bereaved college students who academically persist in the face of adversity? Supplemental research questions to explore this topic include: 1) How does a death loss shape students' experiences of college; 2) What types of support systems do college students use during their bereavement? And 3) What drives students to continue their educational goals?

### **Procedure**

Participants, hereby known as subjects, must meet the following requirements to be eligible to participate in this study: (1) Individuals must be at least 18 years old to participate; (2) Each subject must have experienced a death loss that was significant to them while they were enrolled at [REDACTED]; (3) Individuals must have experienced their death loss at least two years ago from the start of the study; (4) Individuals must have maintained a 2.0 or higher term and cumulative GPA since the death loss; and (5) Individuals must have scored between 1-10 on Beck's Depression Inventory.

Subject's involvement in this research study will include an initial two-hour interview, a 15-minute journaling activity that you will complete on your own, and a final two-hour interview. You will then receive an email with the transcripts from your two interviews and journaling activity and will be given a week to provide your feedback. Next, you will be emailed the preliminary analyses, interpretations, and conclusions from the study. You will have two weeks to provide your feedback and insights. Any feedback that is provided will be incorporated into the final manuscript. The total anticipated time that you would be contributing to this research study is approximately seven hours.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in the research study is completely voluntary. You are able to withdraw yourself from the study at any time, without penalty or explanation. Your decision to participate or not will not affect any relationship that you have with Bowling Green State University, [REDACTED], or the researcher.

### **Confidentiality**

Subject's identities will remain confidential throughout this study. Individuals that participate in this study will be able to create their own pseudonym or have one chosen for them. This pseudonym will be used throughout the interview process and in the final manuscript. Additionally, personal identifiers will be masked. If a subject plays football, for example, I will mask that sport and say that the subject is an athlete (not a football player). However, there may be circumstances where confidentiality may be breached. For example, if the subject reports harm to themselves or others, personal information regarding their participation in this study may be disclosed.

The electronic journal activity as well as the interviews that are conducted will be digitally recorded and electronically transcribed on my personal computer that is password protected. The signed Informed Consent Form and audio recordings will be stored and locked in a secure

environment that only I will have access to. The signed Informed Consent Form and audio recordings will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of my research study.

Data derived from participation in this study may be held for future use, and may be stored and re-analyzed or otherwise be combined with other data at a later date after the conclusion of this study. The results from this study may be used in future presentations and publications, but you will not be identified. Only the researcher, Cari Ann Urabe, will have access to your identity.

### **Potential Risks**

There may be emotional risks that occur as a result of participating in this research study. Talking about the death loss of someone significant may result in emotions such as anger, grief, guilt, loneliness, peace, relief, and sadness. Subjects that choose to participate in this research may choose to skip any part of the study at any time or withdraw from the study all together without penalty or explanation.

Efforts to minimize risks include:

1. The researcher has a master's degree in Student Development Administration from Seattle University and completed the doctoral coursework in the Higher Education Administration program at Bowling Green State University. She is knowledgeable about Student Development theories and has worked with diverse college students in Student Affairs positions for over 10 years.
2. Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, Chair/Professor in the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University, is supervising this study.
3. Dr. [REDACTED], Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Certified Group Psychotherapist who is the [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] has been consulted about this study and will be available for additional support.
4. A pilot study will be conducted prior to the research study.
5. Interested participants, whether they are selected for the study or not, will be provided both on and off campus resources.
6. Participants must have experienced a death loss at least two years ago. By having two years pass since the death loss, this allows the participant to have had some space to grieve and for feelings from the death loss to gradually ease.
7. Participants must have scored between 1-10 on Beck's Depression Inventory to be eligible to participate in this study. This scoring indicates that the individual is not at risk of depression.
8. Throughout the study, participants will be asked how they are doing and if they need any breaks.
9. Participants will be reminded throughout the study that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they can choose to leave at any time without penalty or explanation.

## Potential Benefits

By participating in this research study, you will benefit by having the opportunity to express yourself and share your personal story around death loss and academic persistence with someone that is open and interested in your life story. This may not have been a topic that you have had an opportunity to share with others previously, so this study will also allow subjects to reflect upon and process information about themselves and their experience. Additionally, your participation will assist me in creating a strengths-based perspective on the bereaved college student experience. Most scholarship on bereaved college students tends to focus on negative outcomes that arise from a death loss. Your narrative will contribute to the existing literature on an understudied population and will help the campus community to better understand how to support bereaved college students.

## Confidential Campus Resources

The [REDACTED] is a medical and mental health service provider for students of [REDACTED]. Counseling and Psychological Services staff are licensed clinical psychologists and supervised graduate trainees that provide assessment and short-term individual and small group counseling to help students be fully engaged in their academic and social activities. Short-term individual, couple, family, and group counseling are available. The staff at the [REDACTED] also provide referrals for individuals that are interested in longer term counseling or more intensive treatment. Professional counseling staff are on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

### Counseling Walk-in Hours:

- Monday – Friday 9:00am-4:00pm

### Cost of Counseling Services

- Intake and the first six sessions are free of charge
- Sessions 7-12 have a \$10 charge
- Sessions 13+ have a \$25 charge
- Services free to sexual assault survivors and Pell Grant recipients



## Long Term/Off Campus Counseling

If you are interested in long term or specialized care, we suggest you consider off campus counseling. For an off campus referral, email your insurance information and any preference to [REDACTED]. You may also schedule an intake with a counselor for a more in depth discussion of your needs.

### Confidential, 24/7 Helpline

If you feel that you need support from a mental health professional, but cannot attend a session at Emmons or off campus, you may call the Confidential, 24/7 helpline at [REDACTED]. The hotline is there for you any time to gain immediate support and link you to resources

### Office of [REDACTED]

The mission of the Office [REDACTED] is to support [REDACTED] students, faculty and staff in their pursuit of a vibrant and meaningful religious and spiritual life while engaging religious pluralism with a commitment to mutual respect, awareness and dialogue.



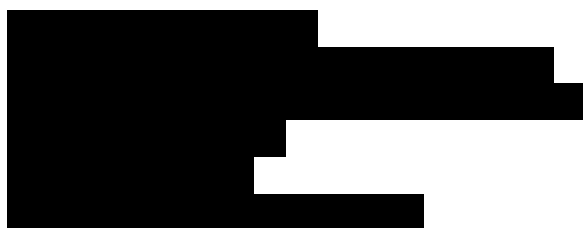
### **Other Campus Resources**

At [REDACTED], faculty advisors are the primary source of advising and guidance for students as they navigate the academic program. The [REDACTED] provides additional support for students on routine academic matters, including questions about academic policies and procedures, tracking Core Requirements, placement exams, transferring credit from other institutions, and so on. We also frequently meet with students who are undecided about a major or minor and wish to discuss the various options.



### Dean of Students Office

The Dean of Students Office supports the mission of the college by taking the lead in promoting an environment that is challenging, supportive, and conducive to learning in all aspects of student life. The office is open to students, faculty and staff, and parents who have questions for which there may not be an obvious answer or an office to address the issue. Our services and practices are broadly characterized as advocacy, support, and administration.



### Disability Services

The primary mission of the Disability Services Team is to help students participate in college life to the fullest extent possible. Through providing reasonable and appropriate accommodations,



assisting students with self-advocacy, providing academic support and counseling, and ensuring adherence to state and federal disability laws, the Office of Disability Services is committed to enhancing students' academic development and independence. By working closely with faculty, staff, and administrators, our goal is to create a supportive community that promotes awareness, sensitivity and understanding of students with disabilities.



### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this research study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Cari Ann Urabe, at [curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu) or 808-277-4691. You may also contact the advisor for this study, Dr. Maureen E. Wilson at [mewilso@bgsu.edu](mailto:mewilso@bgsu.edu) or 419-372-7382. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at Bowling Green State University by calling 419-372-7716 or emailing them at [orc@bgsu.edu](mailto:orc@bgsu.edu).

By signing this consent form, you are stating that you have read the form and consent to participate in the research study.

I am at least eighteen years of age. I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this research project and the possible risks as outlined above. I understand that I may withdraw my participation on this project at any time without prejudice or penalty of any kind. I hereby agree to participate in this research project.

Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject should sign two copies of this form. Keep one copy and return the other to the investigator.

## APPENDIX H. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD: PUBLIC MIDWEST

**From:** [REDACTED] <[no-reply@irbnet.org](mailto:no-reply@irbnet.org)>

**Date:** March 9, 2018 at 8:44:32 AM PST

**To:** Maureen Wilson <[mewilso@bgsu.edu](mailto:mewilso@bgsu.edu)>, Cari Ann Urabe <[curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu)>

**Subject:** IRBNet Board Action

**Reply-To:** [REDACTED]

Please note that [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [1069827-5] DEATH, TRANSITION, AND RESILIENCE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE OF BEREAVED COLLEGE STUDENTS

Principal Investigator: Cari Ann Urabe

Submission Type: Revision

Date Submitted: February 27, 2018

Action: APPROVED

Effective Date: March 9, 2018

Review Type: Expedited Review

Should you have any questions you may contact [REDACTED].

Thank you,

The IRBNet Support Team

## APPENDIX I. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD: PUBLIC WEST

**From:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** March 15, 2018 at 8:13:11 AM PDT

**To:** Cari Ann Hisako Urabe <[curabe@bgsu.edu](mailto:curabe@bgsu.edu)>

**Subject: RE: Request to recruit students for study**

Dear Cari Ann Hisako Urabe,

We have determined that [REDACTED] IRB review is not required for your research project titled “Death, Transition, and Resilience: A Narrative Study or the Academic Persistence of Bereaved College Students”.

Please consider my dated signature on the attached document the formal notice of this determination.

Thank you,

[REDACTED]  
[IRB] Administrator  
[REDACTED]

## APPENDIX J. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD: PRIVATE WEST

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] **Decision/Comment Form**

**I. Name of Investigator and Title of Proposal:**

Cari Ann Urabe

*Death, Transition, and Resilience: A Narrative Study of the Academic Persistence of Bereaved College Students*

[IRB] Proposal #: Urab-F17072

**II. Decisions/Comments:**☒ Proposal approved☒ Full Committee review on November 7, 2017☐ Expedited review☐ Approval of the proposal pending on the following for further review:

**III. Additional Comments:** The Committee re-reviewed your research proposal taking into consideration your letter of appeal dated 10/26/17, and the letter from the Associated Director of Residential Education (you immediate supervisor) dated 11/2/17. The [IRB] felt that any conflict of interest issues they previously had were clarified and addressed, and the [IRB] approved your research project.

On behalf of [IRB]:

By: [REDACTED], [IRB] Chair  
November 8, 2017