Family-Centered Events and Bereaved College Students: An Exploration of How Colleges Can Create an Inclusive Environment for Bereaved Students

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Abstract

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Family-Centered Events & Bereaved College Students: An Exploration of How Colleges Can Create an Inclusive Environment for Bereaved Students

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The purpose of this study was to examine the potential impact that family-centered university events have on triggering and/or isolating students who have experienced the death of a parent. Based on the findings in this research, the aim was to determine how colleges can create an inclusive and supportive community for these students regardless of time elapsed since the death occurred. This includes implementing college-sponsored events, and other potential responses that acknowledge and validate the loss these students have experienced.

To gain access to this information, in-depth personal interviews were conducted with students aged 18-26 who identify as male, female, or transgendered and have experienced the death of a parent at any point in their life through college.

This study will also explore what practices colleges are currently implementing in order to provide sensitivity during these emotionally arousing events, as well as what other considerations can be taken to reduce isolation. This information will be presented in the closing chapter for additional consideration.

Personal Statement

This research was motivated by my own experience of losing my father at the age of 21. As a college student, I distinctly remember feeling excluded from the Dad's Weekend events following my dad's death. As other students paraded around campus with their dad's while their dad's sported gear identifying themselves as proud parents of an Ohio University student, I could not help but feel resentment and anger towards them as well as my father. Although my dad had only visited me once while I was away at college, I still felt as though the other students were flaunting their privilege in my face. My dad was no longer alive, and thus could not even choose whether or not he would be attending the festivities. That left me feeling as though I did not belong anywhere near the happy, drunken celebrations occurring at a place where I usually felt so welcomed. I intentionally chose not to attend undergraduate commencement because I no longer thought of it as a happy family-oriented event, but rather just a ploy for more money from the school. I will also be choosing not to attend my graduate commencement.

My dad died of an unexpected case of skin cancer, less than 6 months after being diagnosed. To me, the loss came as a huge shock. My dad had been a survivor of leukemia, and had been battling bipolar disorder for many years. I used to think that my dad would die from some erratic behavior stemming from his uncontrollable manic and depressive episodes. Yet, when I learned that he had cancer, I still believed that he could overcome it, just as he had overcome the leukemia and the many car accidents he had survived (these were also linked to his bipolar disorder and medication issues).

My dad lived just long enough to see my older sister get married, although he had to be pushed down the aisle in a wheelchair instead of escorting her as tradition would have it. After my dad died 2 months later, I felt as though a major life moment had been stolen from me. Although my dad and I had a strained relationship, I still always saw him walking me down the aisle, and my future husband asking for his blessing to marry me. (I secretly hoped my dad would give the same response that I have been told my grandpa gave to him when he asked to marry my mom: "Good! Get her the hell outta here!") Now 5 years after my dad's death, I am happily married. Although my husband, Nick, never met my dad, I know that he would have received his blessing.

While I understand that my university could not predict the severity of my loss, and while I can appreciate the difficulty it would be for administration to ever be aware that my loss occurred, I still feel as though there is at least some obligation on their behalf to respond. I attended Ohio University for 8 years and experienced wonderful community events: from the Virginia Tech memorial to Take Back the Night rallies, from Siblings Weekends to the Halloween Festivals. I know first-hand that there is far more work that can be done to create an inclusive and supportive environment for people like myself. We should not expect or accept individuals to grieve in secrecy or isolation. We should not overlook the fact that celebratory events create feelings of exclusion and sadness for many students who don't fit the standard requirements for participation. We should not assume that the policies and practices that are currently in place are sufficient, but rather we should evaluate their success and failures, and find ways to improve them.

It is amazing how much your life changes after the death of a parent. Suddenly, friends that you could count on for anything can never truly appreciate your feelings of intense sadness. Suddenly, the sound of someone's voice over the phone becomes something you no longer take for granted. Suddenly, you realize the importance of teaching children right from wrong, and you appreciate all that your parents have done for you, finally believing that they did the best they could.

To be honest, I often wished my dad would somehow go away and leave us alone forever due to all the drama we had to endure, but never would I have wished for him to suffer the pain and anxiety of facing death. After he died, I felt so guilty for wishing ill upon him. I felt so lost and confused. My dad had been emotionally and physically abusive to me, my sister, and my mother. Following his death, I thought of myself as a survivor of his abuse. Yet I had no idea what that meant for me. I attended counseling twice afterward, once through the university that was provided to me for free, and once several years later in the community. It took me several years to come to terms with everything about my dad's death. Even now, although I consider myself healed from the loss, I still cry when I think about it all. I think about how my dad will never get to meet the children I will someday bear. I think about how he never got a fair shot to make amends for the pain he caused. I think about where we go when we die and if my dad got a second shot at life. I think about how my dad wanted nothing more before he died than to go skydiving. I wish that I had kidnapped him from the hospital and driven him around the country, just so he could get a chance to see it all before he died. I think about how many beautiful sunsets he has missed, but I wonder if the view is better in Heaven.

Dedication

To my dad who died at 58 years young,

To my brothers & sister who helped me move on,

To all those who have suffered the same,

May this research help bring peace to the pain.

Acknowledgments

A heartfelt thank you goes to Dr. Jenny Chabot for all the support and guidance you've provided me, as well as to Dr. Joan Jurich and Dr. Cynthia Anderson for their willingness to support this research as my committee chair members. Thank you to all my participants for helping make this research possible, and for your willingness to discuss the various aspects surrounding your loss. Thank you to the many others who have conducted similar research in hopes of gaining a better understanding of bereavement and to help make it a little less painful. For those who have implemented policies and practices to ensure belonging of bereaved students in their schools, your work is greatly appreciated. Thank you to my husband, my family, and my friends for your everlasting support and encouragement to my work. Thank you to Ohio University for allowing me the opportunity to study and conduct my research here, which will ultimately guide me in my future endeavors. I am grateful to everyone who has played a role in my journey, and for those I have yet to meet.

"We all take different paths in life, but no matter where we go, we take a little of each other everywhere."

"Trauma bonds people. . . (but) it bonds those who go through it,
not the people you tell it to"
-Paul; Cabin Fever (2002)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine the following scenario:

You are a university graduate student taking a walk through the main stretch of a college campus on the Saturday afternoon of Dad's Weekend. The campus restaurants are packed with father-child pairs; the university bookstore's window display holds a dozen different types of gear that dads can purchase to show their pride. Your dad died 3 years earlier, and every year since then, you have felt a strange feeling in the pit of your stomach when you encounter people celebrating on this weekend. The feeling is as though your body is telling you that you do not belong here; not just among the crowd of people, but on the campus altogether. After all, you do not have a father anymore. There is no one for you to share this event with. Normally, this thought would not even cross your mind; you have been walking the streets of this campus for over 5 years. Although you have been to counseling to deal with the grief of your loss, these feelings arise again year after year.

For students who have experienced the death of a parent, this scenario can be a very real and likely occurrence. While college is a time to celebrate a transition into adulthood and to acknowledge student's autonomy and independence, there can be an unintentional trigger of bereavement for students whose parents are not alive to help them through this experience. This is especially true for family-centered events that are aimed at the involvement of parents and siblings in this transition. How the university acknowledges and responds to the possible reminder of loss may impact various aspects of a student's college experience including: the degree of inclusion in school events and

clubs, effects on behaviors, academic performance or mental health, as well as their overall satisfaction with the school. Therefore, examining what practices and procedures universities currently utilize to provide support and inclusion can help enhance bereaved students' experiences. More importantly, universities must be willing to practice alternatives that have proven successful in other schools.

The death of a parent is something that most individuals will encounter in their lifetime. Steen (1998) found that one out of 20 American children under the age of 15 has experienced the death of either one or both of their parents. Regardless if the parent is biologically related, adoptive, or perhaps a foster parent, this is an inevitable fact of life that encompasses a major emotional journey. An unfortunate reality is that this experience may occur at any time, and sometimes without warning. Although the report *Deaths: Final Data for 2010* does not indicate whether an individual is a parent or not, 165,598 men and women between the ages of 30-49 died that year (p. 25). Cancer has increasingly become a prime culprit in cause of death in the United States, and Americans are generally dying at a faster rate after diagnosis than in previous years (Ries et al., 2007), meaning that children are facing the death of their parent at a younger age as well.

To further complicate this life change, many cultures consider death to be a taboo topic of conversation (Holland, 2008). Likewise, inconsistent allowances of grief—such as public mourning of a famous person, but limited time off for the loss of an immediate family member—continue to create ambiguous guidelines for people facing these losses. The reason for these practices is the constant change in perception of death as a society. For example, extended families are less likely to live in the same house, which means

that children do not as commonly see their grandparents age and ultimately die. Instead, the primary focus is on the nuclear family, pushing death as something that only happens to the elderly in hospitals or nursing homes (Floerchinger, 1991, p. 148). For a long time, children were left out of the grieving process altogether due to the belief that they were too young to understand or to mourn; however, "the research that has been performed has shown that children do indeed grieve and often experience a significant amount of distress in response to a loss" (Hope & Hodge, 2006, pp. 107-108). Children need a positive role model, supportive community and family, and the space and time to grieve. Otherwise they are less likely to successfully move through the grieving process, leaving feelings of confusion and sadness.

Schools are an important component in the grieving process because of the extensive amount of time students spend there. One possible reality is that children might receive the news of a death while at school. Upon returning to school from facing the death of a parent, students are in need of positive support from trustworthy, caring individuals. Unfortunately, many students report that peers are often unable or unwilling to help them deal with feelings about their loss (Balk & Vesta, 1998; Floerchinger, 1991; McCusker & Witherow, 2012; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). This is likely due to the fact that they themselves are moving through the same developmental phases and tasks, and are in need of their own guidance. Teachers are likely to have a positive rapport with students due to the significant amount of time spent with them. They can often serve as a supportive community for a bereaved child, if they are willing. The school's willingness to be a part of the grieving process has made an important contribution to the family and

the student because “without effective intervention, experiences such as a significant or traumatic loss may undermine a child's development and the progression of skills essential for ongoing development and effective functioning” (Nadar, 2010, p. 1). An educated and proactive decision about how to work with grieving students must be reached prior to helping a student cope with the loss of a parent to ensure a smooth and effective response.

When a child loses a parent at any point in life up through college, there are many reminders of that parent's absence. As children move into young adolescence and adulthood, the grieving process changes as their understanding of the finality, causality, and the need to grieve changes as well (Willis, 2002). Throughout the college experience, family events and momentous life achievements can be challenging to a student. While “anniversaries of the death may be a particular problem for children, . . . birthdays and other special days or times such as Christmas may also be problematic” (Holland, 2008, p. 420). Likewise, it is important to recognize that common college events (i.e., Move-In Weekend, Homecoming, Parents Weekends, and Graduation) can also be a reminder of loss. For students who lost their parent unexpectedly or tragically, grief may be more easily aroused by these events. Likewise, students who struggle to grieve “normally” due to various developmental factors or previous life experiences may also need a higher level of sensitivity and responsiveness. Latency effects and reminders of a loss mean that, regardless of how much time a child has had to cope with the death, a certain degree of sensitivity is required to validate their experience and to acknowledge the reality of the challenges and changes they may be facing.

What Is Missing From Parental Loss Research?

While previous research has provided a very stable foundation for understanding death from a child's perspective (Fearnley, 2010; Holland, 2008; Hope & Hodge, 2006; Noppe & Noppe, 1997; Werner-Lin, Biank & Rubenstein, 2010), there is still a lot of uncertainty about the "appropriate" response method (Schlozman, 2003) that schools should use. School professionals have frequently used interventions such as expressing condolences and support to their students. Some schools may offer grief support groups or grief therapy, which are regularly evaluated for effectiveness, as well as regular assessment of students they refer to such interventions. Other schools may go so far as to fly the university flag at half mast on the day of funerals for deceased students (McCusker & Witherow, 2012), yet for the death of a student's parent, this practice does not appear to be utilized. Due to the various degrees of grief, it may be difficult to develop a universal response method. Since grieving can be a very individual process, responses should be equally individualized to fit student's needs.

Research tells us the effects that grief may have on a student's mental well-being and social involvement, but does not indicate what role university-sponsored events play in creating or repeating feelings of grief (Hope & Hodge, 2006; Krager, Wrenn & Hirt, 1990; Werner-Lin, Biank, & Rubenstein, 2009). Although most students will express their bereavement around the time of their loss, many factors may inhibit a resolution such as the age of the child, response from community members, or access to information about what normal grieving entails. Likewise, there are many potential triggers to remind a student of their loss as they move from adolescence into adulthood. While common life

events such as: marriage, birthdays, and holidays can create a trigger of loss, school-sponsored events may also play a role in resurfacing grief. Therefore, it is critical to understand what effect family-centered events has on resurfacing feelings of loss, and to consider a long-term response that colleges can implement to help reduce exclusion.

Significant Implications

The increasing number of youth facing the death of a parent is cause enough to bring light to this issue. Yet the recognition of the occurrence of a problem has never been enough to warrant coming up with some sort of response. Therefore, it is important to mention that while these students may find ways to be successful without involvement from the school community in their bereavement, research has shown that the death of a parent has significant effects on a child's behaviors, academic performance, and overall mental well-being (Coyne & Beckman, 2012; Holland, 2004; Holland, 2008; Noppe & Noppe, 1997; Schlozman, 2003). The success of overcoming the death of a parent will likely impact the overall manner in which the child approaches the world: with either trust or distrust, openly or resistive, positively or negatively.

Regardless of the age or manner in which a child loses a parent, there is bound to be an impact on the student's college experience. Although a student may have experienced the death of a parent much earlier in life or childhood, the triggering of memories surrounding the loss is something that schools must pay attention to. Due to the high volume of parental involvement throughout the year, college can be a time when feelings of the loss may resurface. For some students, college may be the first time that they actually begin to think about the many different effects their parent's death has on

their transition into adulthood. Balk (2001) reminds us that scholarship is more than academic performance, but rather that it is a university's purpose ". . . to extend knowledge through teaching, and to apply knowledge to help persons and others in need" (p. 74). Therefore, universities need to pay attention to potential arousal of these feelings, as well as have a planned response for students who are troubled by them.

For college-aged students who lose a parent, the grieving process may be further complicated. Considering that college is a transitory time itself, the death of a parent or reminders of the loss may increase student difficulty adjusting to new expectations in personal development. The distance from a familiar space, as well as from supportive individuals and involvement in the burial process may be challenging. Similarly, "campus life is geared primarily towards academic and social activities, leaving little room for bereaved students to get the support and understanding they need to make it through the grieving process" (Janowiak, Mei-Tal, & Drapkin, 1995, pp. 55-56). Generally speaking, schools often provide support for students in these situations, linking them to counseling services and academic assistance.

However, there seems to be an inconclusive understanding of how the college-aged developmental tasks towards independence, autonomy, and personal relationships are impacted by parental loss over an extended period of time (Balk, 2001; Janowiak, Mei-Tal & Drapkin, 1995; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Therefore, in order to create an inclusive environment for these students, it is important to consider ". . . the longitudinal consequences of unresolved bereavement, and the outcomes of interventions to promote bereavement recovery" (Balk, 2001, p. 10).

There are several potential benefits to schools responding effectively to bereaved students. First, if schools could teach students how to help a peer through the grieving process, the amount of community support would increase greatly. This could also help alleviate the work of teachers as direct responders in times of grief, and create a more inclusive environment. Lastly, if a school's main purpose in responding to a student's loss is retention, then it should be acknowledged that according to the *First Year (Freshman) Undergraduate Involvement at Ohio University,* "The experiences during the first (freshman) year effect student's development and performance throughout college. Indeed, attrition occurs most frequently during the first year and retention programs most often are directed toward first-year undergraduates" (Ohio University, 2012, p. 3). This study linked student retention rates to social involvement in university activities and clubs. In 2011-12, 71% of the freshmen population identified "fitting into the campus community" as an important part of the college experience, yet only 64% reported satisfaction in their own experience (Ohio University, 2012, p. 12). Since there is no direct mention of a correlation between students who had lost a parent and their retention, consideration should be given to understanding if in fact a student's decision to remain at Ohio University, or other colleges, is linked to having a supportive community after the death of a parent.

The main purpose of this research paper is to identify whether family-centered events hosted by universities trigger feelings of parental loss, and if a bereaved student has adequate access to a supportive community during these events, regardless of time elapsed since their parent's death. Based on the findings, information will be used to

make recommendations for how universities can better provide support and inclusion for these students. This information was provided by individuals who are college-aged (18-26) and have personally experienced the death of a parent prior to or during, or after college entrance. Participants will be asked to share ways that their university addressed their needs, and what methods they would have liked to have been utilized.

Limitations

This research is not necessarily representative of the larger population. Considering the small sample size, generalizations cannot be made. One significant limitation is that of the 8 participants, 7 identify as Caucasian. Thus, results may be limited to the experience of this ethnicity, and may not include certain traditions or values of other cultures. Another important consideration is the researcher's personal experience with having lost a parent as a young adult, which has potential to sway interview interpretations. This research only skims the surface in addressing the issue of parental loss. Issues that may complicate grieving may be: personal illness for bereaved individuals, strains on relationships including lesbian and gay students coming out to dying parents, various reactions and expectations surrounding death from different cultural and racial viewpoints, and so forth. Likewise, the participants in this research all described the loss of a biological parent, and thus there was no evaluation on the experience of losing a foster parent, adoptive parent, kinship guardian, or other legal guardian. While participants were encouraged to discuss the response by their remaining caregiver and other significant individuals, there is no detailed evaluation of the support received from these groups of people, and instead, primary focus is given to the college

environment. This research does not seek out information regarding somatic complaints experienced by participants, nor does it inquire any detail of drug or alcohol consumption as a result of the death. A final consideration is the reliability of participants' ability to recall their own personal experiences, and also their progress (or lack thereof) in coping with their losses.

Delimitations

Specific requirements for this study included the following: participants were currently between the ages of 18-27, identified as male, female, or transgendered, and experienced the death of a parent prior to or during their college experience. The deceased parent may have been related either biologically or through adoption, or may have been the legal caregiver/guardian. Preference was given to those who were currently enrolled in college, although an exception can be made if the death of the parent is what caused delayed college entrance.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research paper, certain terms must be defined. The author has attempted to clarify the usage as specifically as possible.

Child may be used in two manners: a) a young child, generally between the ages of 3-12; b) the offspring of an adult. When referencing adult children (age 18-26), they are identified as college-aged students.

School may also be used in two manners: a) Educational institutions between grades K-12 and/or including college; b) College. When referencing specific college events, they are identified as such.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Understanding the Child's Perspective of Death

As mentioned in the introduction to this piece, a child can be either an offspring to an adult, or a young person in general. This section aims at understanding how the various stages of child development impacts the experience of the death of a parent or caregiver (see Table 1).

One of the most important things to consider when discussing death with children is their biological and developmental age, as this can be an indicator of their understanding of death. For young infants, aged 0-2, death can be a complicated experience. Due to the nonverbal nature of infancy, expressions of grief are often behavioral instead. While the death of someone who is not close to the child is easier to cope with, "children who have been separated from their mothers and deprived of nurturing can exhibit changes such as listlessness, quietness, unresponsiveness to a smile or a coo, physical changes (including weight loss), and a decrease in activity and lack of sleep" (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2014, p. 2). Providing a routine schedule and maintaining care of the infant's basic needs can help reduce behavioral changes. Because the developmental task of infancy is to develop trust in the world and people, it is important that a grieving infant have a supportive and nurturing adult to provide care. As the child grows older, explaining death that occurred during infancy might help make sense of their experience because "children are more likely than adults to experience fragmented recollection and a distorted understanding of the loss experience" (Gilbert, 2008, p. 2). Discussing the death can also help reduce feelings of abandonment.

Table 1

Grief and Developmental Stages

Age	Understanding of death	Expressions of grief
Infancy to 2 years	Is not yet able to understand death. Separation from mother causes changes.	Quietness, crankiness, decreased activity, poor sleep & weight loss.
2-6 years	Death is like sleeping. Death is temporary, and not final. Dead person can come back to life.	Asks many questions. Problems in eating, sleeping, and bladder and bowel control. Fear of abandonment. Tantrums.
6-9 years	Death is thought of as a person or spirit (skeleton, ghost, and bogeyman). Death is final and frightening. Death happens to others, it will not happen to me.	Curious about death. Asks specific questions. May have exaggerated fears about school. May have aggressive behaviors (especially boys). Some concerns about imaginary illnesses. May feel abandoned.
9 years & older	Everyone will die. Death is final and cannot be changed. Even I will die.	Heightened emotions, guilt, anger, shame. Mood swings. Fear of rejection. Changes in eating habits. Sleeping problems. Impulsive behaviors. Feels guilty about being alive.

Note. Adapted from "Grief, Bereavement, and Coping with Loss" by the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health (2014, October 8). Retrieved from http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/HealthProfessional/page6

Likewise, children aged 2-3 are still learning to make sense of their experiences and developing an understanding of the world around them. "In this age, children often confuse death with sleep and can experience anxiety" (NCI, 2014, p. 2). It is not uncommon for children in this age range to worry about death, and to express themselves through changes in their behaviors. At this age, children may ask many questions about death, attempting to gain a better understanding. Furthermore, "children often play death games as a way of working out their feelings and anxieties in a relatively safe setting" (NCI, 2014, p. 2). Adults should be understanding of the difficulty these children face, and should not force them to move through grief faster than they are capable of doing.

Nagy (1948) developed some general guidelines of understanding death based on a child's age: a) between ages 3 to 5, children believe that death is a temporary trip or vacation that a person goes on, with the belief that they will return; b) from ages 5 to 9 children have a more magical view of death as something that can be avoided entirely; and lastly, c) around age 9 children begin to understand the permanency and inevitability of death. While there is no standard response to death in these age ranges, there are several common responses. Adults can expect youth to have questions, worries, and changes in behaviors. Remembering that these are common reactions, adults can respond with empathy and understanding. It is important to include children in the process of dying so that they have time to understand what is happening, to practice moving through loss, and to remember that grief is a normal part of life and living.

For middle school aged children, losing a parent at this age can be particularly uncomfortable due to the youth feeling "different" from their peers, and thus should be

treated with as much focus on maintaining normality as can be provided. Gilbert (2009) tells us to expect: outbursts, refusal of support, sexual acting out, and ". . .conflict between the adolescent and parents in terms of the adolescent's coping mechanisms" (p. 5). It is important to remember that many biological changes occur during this age which can complicate an adolescent's grief. "Adolescents may think they are experiencing grief that is unique and has never been experienced before, that their suffering is unique" (Gilbert, 2009, p. 5); therefore it is especially important to have supportive peers and adults help the child learn to balance grief and normalcy.

As children age into adolescence, there is a shift in understanding death as a permanent change. Likewise, many other biological changes are occurring at this time, which may impact the death experience or vice versa. Sussillo (2005) provides an in-depth exploration of adolescent parental loss, describing how "the sense of self and the attachment-individuation process" are affected by parental loss:

> In adolescence, the focus is on life, limitless potential, and passionate vitality. The adolescent's subjective experience is a cauldron of conflicting forces of change and growth. The body's development and sexual urgency are exhilarating and alarming; the rapidly expanding cognitive competencies are exciting; the anticipated landscape of adult power and privilege is tantalizing and so near. The untimely death of a parent is experienced as an incomprehensible and overwhelming assault that strikes at the core of the adolescent's intrapsychic and external world. (p. 500)

During typical adolescence, youth are adapting to changes in parenting rules and styles, as many parents impose curfews or new rules for behavior management. In cases of divorce, teenagers may be experiencing two separate parenting styles leading to complication about which rules need to be followed and which can be bent. Sussillo (2005) reminds us that ". . . in the normative separation process of adolescence, a paradoxical letting go and holding on occurs" (p. 502), much like the one that occurs when experiencing the death of a parent. Although an adolescent may understand the finality of death, they may still need time and assistance in adjusting to the various changes that result from the loss.

The Importance of Communication

Even before the death of a parent or caregiver, the issue of communication is an important aspect of the grieving process. As previously stated, young children are in fact able to understand death and to grieve a loss. However, the child's understanding of death is different from that of an adult. It is for this reason that communication needs to be open and structured to meet the child's level of understanding. Kroll et al. (1998) emphasizes the need for communication not only between doctor and parents, but also between parents and their children. Open communication can help lower anxiety, and ". . . have a protective effect on patients' psychological adjustment" (p. 880). In this case, the patient is the dying parent, whose response to his or her own death may impact the child's reactions. If a dying parent expresses worry or anger, his or her child will likely mimic these feelings even after the parent dies.

Adults should never try to hide death from children. Instead, "when death is discussed with a child, explanations should be kept as simple and direct as possible. Each child needs to be told the truth with as much detail as can be comprehended at his or her age and stage of development" (NCI, 2014, p. 5). Practitioners and parents should carefully deliver information to younger children, avoiding medical terminology which may lead to more confusion and upset feelings. Patricelli (2006) recommends that adults "tell the child what has happened . . . (and that) showing some vulnerability is okay" (p. 11). When communication is open and honest, children are able to reach safe conclusions about the reality of the loss rather than being left with anxious feelings of uncertainty and isolation. "When a parent dies, . . . younger children often revert to a more magical view of the world . . . As students mature, their growing capacity for complex cognitive and emotional reactions changes their response to grief" (Schlozman, 2003, p. 91). It is important to ensure that children have trustworthy adults to care for them during their adjustment to the loss. Likewise, responses to loss are as diverse as student's ethnicity and culture (Neimeyer et al., 2008, p. 27). This diversity impacts the grieving of individuals as well, and practitioners should demonstrate appropriate cultural sensitivity and response.

After presenting information to the child, there should also be an opportunity for discussion and questions. However, "they may be frightened of asking questions, or of the answers they may find out. For this reason, parents may want to step in and provide answers to some common childhood questions about death, even if the child has not

asked the questions" (Patricelli, 2006, p. 12). Treating death as an uncomfortable topic of conversation will only create later resistance and confusion for children and adolescents.

Another important element is language used. Young children often do not understand euphemisms and may even get a false sense of hope that the parent might return or be reunited with them. One problem is that ". . . some qualified practitioners have difficulties using the words death, dying and dead" (Fearnley, 2010, p. 454). This should be carefully considered before entering such a situation to help alleviate the issue of "the elephant in the room." If a professional is anxious about discussing death with a child, it may lead to serious problems for the child. This can be reduced by having an understanding of child development, especially in relation to how children and youth grieve, and how this is different than grieving as an adult (Fearnley, 2010, p. 456). Young children often times need help making sense of their experiences, for example watching a parent lose hair due to chemotherapy. These experiences should be discussed openly but carefully, and in terms the child will understand.

Parents should agree about how to address the topic of death and understand that the surviving parent will be left to piece together the story if the ill parent indeed dies. Along this level, children need to be permitted to reach their own understanding of death and of the person their parent was. It is important to acknowledge that "a child's adjustment is more closely related to his/her understanding or awareness of the situation rather than the actual circumstances of the death" (Hope & Hodge, 2006, p. 118). This means that it is critical for caregivers to provide a safe space for children to demonstrate their feelings, and to reach their own conclusions. If open communication is encouraged,

respect for the deceased demonstrated, and the allowance of feelings to be shown, children are better able to adjust to the loss.

Lastly, since the mourning ritual helps bring closure to grief, children should be encouraged to help plan and participate in their method of honoring the life of the deceased. "Although children should never be forced to attend or participate in mourning rituals, their participation should be encouraged" (NCI, 2014, p. 5). Adults can use the mourning ritual as an opportunity to role-model appropriate grief, and can serve as a reminder of the deceased's impact on their child's life. It is important to not pressure a child into an uncomfortable environment; for example, requiring them to give a eulogy at a young age, or asking them to make funeral arrangements.

Factors Affecting the Grieving Process

There are several factors about the death of a parent that play a part in how easy or difficult it is for a child to cope with the death of a parent. Hope and Hodge (2006) identified many factors that can impact a child's grieving including: the length of the illness that the parent endures; the remaining caregiver's emotional adjustment to the loss; an emotionally stable home environment; openness of communication between parent and child; positive memories and feelings about the deceased parent; and, the age and gender of the child (especially compared to that of the deceased parent). These factors are rarely isolated, but rather co-occur and influence one another.

Issues about the child's age (developmentally as well as chronologically), gender, and relationship with both parents (prior to and after the death) are important factors. Generally speaking, a child who is older has a more concrete understanding of death and

is therefore able to process the loss better than a younger child. "Girls, regardless of age, expressed more anxiety and somatic symptoms than boys over two years of bereavement. Boys were more likely to have poor conduct and learning difficulties during the first year of bereavement" (Hope & Hodge, 2006, p. 110). However, age and gender are only small pieces in the puzzle that make up a child's response to the death of a parent. The child's relationship with their parent will impact feelings of loss, especially in regards to finding a meaning behind the death and moving forward.

Returning to what we know about child development, explaining that someone is dying or has died to a child may have very different meanings depending on their age or development. "Children who have lost a parent at an early age tend to retain their intense cathexis of the image of the parent. At the same time, they acknowledge only superficially the fact of the parent's death. Thus, they maintain a dual and contradictory attitude toward a major reality of their life" (Mishne, 1979, p. 17). This plays into the child's adjustment to their world after the loss, and relies heavily on the manner in which the child is a part of the grieving process. Other family factors that may contribute to the grieving process may include: number of siblings, age differences between siblings, communication between siblings and/or between parents and children, whether or not the family grieves together, and the child's involvement in the burial/memorial process.

Anticipated death may actually be easier to deal with than a sudden and unanticipated one, as taken from research performed by Saldiner et al. (1999), who found that anticipating a death may lead to greater stress, leading to more difficulty for a child in both an emotional and cognitive sense. While the length of the parent's illness

may create a longer mourning period, the more time that other adults can plan and practice helping the child cope, the easier it will be once the death has occurred. Although violent deaths often increase grief symptoms and decrease a child's ability to make sense of the loss (Neimeyer et al., 2008), involving children in the death will do more good than harm in the long run. Likewise, a child facing an ambiguous loss of a parent, such as a parent suffering from Alzheimer's disease, or a military parent being declared missing in action (MIA), will also have a harder time adjusting to the loss than a straight-forward death (Carroll, Olsen, & Buckmiller, 2007, p. 212). Utilizing death as a teachable moment can help prepare children for future loss and feelings of sadness.

Individual personalities and developmental status are commonly the most relevant factors in how the child grieves, including how long and how severely. Silverman (1987) discussed how leaving home may be the first time that a student begins to cope with the earlier death of a parent. College-aged students who have not reached an emotional maturity to live independently may find they are unable to navigate the many transitions that accompany college entrance and involvement. Given a new space, time, and environment to explore such feelings, there is a potential for students to "recycle" through younger developmental stages (Krager, Wrenn, & Hirt, 1990, p. 41). For these individuals, a supportive community, and opportunities for involvement can be a great source of comfort.

Lastly, response from the community and from the family have a significant impact on how the child will respond to the death. "The research up to this point has been fairly conclusive that the remaining caregiver's emotional adjustment to the loss is a

very important factor in the adjustment of the child" (Hope & Hodge, 2006, p. 109). When the caregiver displays an extreme emotional response to the death, the child is exposed to unsuccessful coping, bitter feelings and remorse. This leaves the grieving process incomplete and the child is not given an appropriate model to follow. Furthermore, grieving that is done in isolation is more likely to result in a difficult adjustment to the death. This will be discussed further in the "Supportive Individuals" section of this chapter.

Compounded Loss

The death of a parent can be a difficult life change in and of itself. Yet, death can often be accompanied by many other changes in life. When coming from a single parent household, the death of a parent might mean that the child will be facing numerous other challenges such as having to move to another city, school district, or home. This, of course, leads to issues with rebuilding a social network, feelings of community, and building positive relationships. For these reasons, it is important to study parental loss further to ensure that children who do move after a parent's death can have access to appropriate support within the new school and community. Failure to communicate the loss to the new school can further isolate the child from being able to cope.

The loss of familiar spaces (i.e., home, school, community buildings) is also a difficult transition and can increase the length of time it may take for a child to adjust to these changes. Werner-Lin, Biank, and Rubenstein (2009) discussed many of the compounded losses that may accompany the death of a parent including a change in "social and relational worlds, including important teachers, community leaders, friends,

and neighbors" (p. 132). These added difficulties are likely to negatively impact the child's ability to grieve or cope quickly. Children need adults in their lives to provide them with meaningful experiences and to act as a "compass" as they navigate their feelings. Finding these individuals in a new environment can be hard and may seem meaningless if a child feels lost in a sea of changes. Obstacles for grieving college students include: returning to school, being away from home, concentrating on studies, losing financial and emotional support, being excluded from the social mainstream, and feeling concern for the surviving members (Florenchinger, 1991, p. 149). This is when assessments and proactive outreach by schools can be particularly helpful.

Even if a child does not undergo these secondary transitions, other aspects of death are sure to follow. Ensuring that the child's basic needs are being met can help provide a feeling of normalcy. To reject children's grief and/or withhold them from the burial process and memory-making of the deceased can lead to a child feeling isolated and unimportant. Holland (2004) advised of the compounded difficulties of a "problematic transition" when isolation and exclusion in the home extended further into similar feelings at school- leading to ". . . a potential decline in academic attainment, at times a reduction in life chances, and on occasions involvement in the fringes of criminal subculture and, for example, substance abuse" (p. 23). These effects on child behaviors and academic performance will be addressed further in the "Effects on Student Development" portion of this chapter.

The Tasks of Grief

When thinking about the grieving process, many people think of the traditional five *stages* of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) as how individuals respond to a death. However, Vickio (2008) presents a more fluid series of *tasks* involved in grieving which are more flexible (p. 46) for bereaved individuals. The four tasks of grief are as follows: a) accepting the reality of the death, b) doing one's duty to the deceased, c) regaining a sense of personal control, and d) making sense of the world (pp. 46-47). While these tasks share similarities to the stages of grief, there is a more specific focus on using the death as an opportunity to experience growth. Seeing death as empowering instead of debilitating can lessen grief symptoms, and decrease the amount of time spent grieving. Accepting the reality of the death is partially linked to understanding the finality of life, which, again, is something developed with age. It also entails accepting the details surrounding the death, whether they be violent or natural. Doing one's duty to the deceased is a personal journey taken on by the survivors of the loss in whatever sense they feel they still "owe" something to the person's life or their death. Regaining a sense of personal control means not allowing the death to dictate the direction a person moves forward, but rather using it as an optional guide. Lastly, making sense of the world means reassessing one's personal relationship with others and with nature. It entails one's belief about goodness and badness, right and wrong, and other elements of what it means to be a part of the world in which we live. It is the final task in completing mourning or grief.

There are many different understandings of what it means to "complete mourning," but generally speaking, "resolution of a loss occurs only when the work or process of grieving has been accomplished" (Floerchinger, 1991, p. 147). In more specific terms, individuals should be able to accept and move on from the death with a positive impact on the way in which they already relate to the world. For most individuals who are capable of healthy grieving, this is not an issue. Yet about 10-15% of bereaved person's risk severe long-term psychological and physical issues when dealing with complicated grief (Neimeyer et al., 2008). Due to the developmental tasks that college-aged students already face, such as transitioning into autonomous and independent individuals, grief can be a complicated and unwelcome aspect. Specifically, grief can negatively impact feelings of competence and self-worth (Balk, 2001, p. 69), especially if the child is excluded from the grieving process. Grief that has been delayed due to family values or practices may mean that a young adult will regress in their developmental tasks as they finally confront feelings about their loss.

It is normal that "because of the broad range of both normal and troubled adjustments to parental loss, educators may be concerned about whether students are responding appropriately and about how best to help students as they grieve" (Schlozman, 2003, p. 91). One way to deal with this is to understand the developmental tasks of children (see Table 2). Another simple solution is to listen to the student's concerns and asking about his or her belief and understanding of death. Understanding these developmental needs can help guide the school's response to creating an inclusive and supportive environment.

Table 2

Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Approximate age	Virtues	Psychosocial crisis	Significant relationships	Existential questions	Examples
0-2 years	Hopes	Basic trust vs. mistrust	Mother	Can I trust the world?	Feeding, abandonment
2-4 years	Will	Autonomy vs. shame & doubt	Parents	Is it okay to be me?	Toilet training, clothing self
4-5 years	Purpose	Initiative vs. guilt	Family	Is it okay for me to do, move & act?	Exploring, using tools, making art
5-12 years	Competence	Industry vs. inferiority	Neighbors, school	Can I make it in the world?	School, sports
13-19 years	Fidelity	Identity vs. role confusion	Peers, role model	Who am I? What can I be?	Social relationships
20-39 years	Love	Intimacy vs. isolation	Friends, partners	Can I love?	Romantic relationships
40-64 years.	Care	Generativity vs. stagnation	Household, workmates	Can I make my life count?	Work, parenthood
65 & older	Wisdom	Ego integrity vs. despair	Mankind, my kind	Is it okay to have been me?	Reflection of life

Note. Adapted from "Eight Ages of Man," by E. Erikson, 1966, *International Journal of Psychiatry*, *2*(3), pp. 281-300.

Effects of Grief on Student Development

As previously discussed, loss has the potential to lead to many different scenarios of complicated grief. Although only a small portion of the population faces these challenges, they are not issues to be taken lightly. Many scholars concur that if not appropriately confronted, these feelings can lead to alcohol and drug use, likely furthering negative feelings in a cyclical and destructive manner. For example, many somatic and mental health issues are likely to arise, and may mutually reinforce physical issues such as insomnia (Neimeyer et al., 2008, p. 29). Citing various sources, Balk, Walker and Baker (2010) discuss some mental health issues that may arise including: depression, chronic physical illness, suicidal ideation, extreme guilt, decrease in job and school performance, and problems in interpersonal relationships. Bereaved individuals are at higher risk for drug and alcohol abuse if they cannot appropriate manage or overcome their emotions. The responses that bereaved students receive from their community play a direct role in how the child deals with his or her feelings. Responses that dismiss or minimize the suffering may lead to confused feelings, depression, and isolation. Balk and Vesta (1998), as well as Janowiak et al. (1995) note that responses from friends may not be encouraging or supportive. Responding to a grieving individual may be challenging and uncomfortable, especially if the responder does not have much experience dealing with grief first-hand or previously had a poor experience.

Parents are a child's constant connection to learning and implementing the use of new skills. They serve as role models and motivators for kids to independently learn to navigate their way through the world. Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) discuss how

competence and ability may be further challenged, for example, with students who lack adequate study skills or communication skills, as ". . . keenly feel(ing) the loss of someone on whom they depended for reassurance and emotional support" (p. 17). Without this person in their lives, students may question their ability to be assertive, self-reliant, or smart enough to succeed. Some individuals may struggle with identifying, accepting, and expressing their feelings about their loss, as their need for independent problem solving or emotional support is greater than their emotionally mature peers (p. 16). Having established services for bereaved students can help alleviate these feelings, normalizing the grief experience and providing a supportive and encouraging environment to discuss these issues.

Making Meaning of the Loss

One task of grief is to make meaning of the loss. This is related to the developmental task of children and youth, who are dealing with issues of purpose, competence, fidelity, and love. Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) break down meaning-making into three processes: a) sense-making, b) benefit-finding, and c) identity reconstruction. For children and young adults, making meaning of a death can be incredibly challenging. "Bereaved students, regardless of age, seek cognitive understanding of sometimes senseless losses, struggle with the powerful emotions death engenders, confront the grief responses of others to the same loss, and seek to reestablish a sense of purpose and direction as they integrate the loss into their ongoing lives" (Neimeyer et al., 2008, p. 29). Making sense of a death means that the individual understands why it happened, and accepts the finality. Even deeper than that, bereaved

individuals must find a benefit to their loss. This entails believing that there is a positive reason for the death, and applying that reason into the way the child views the world. This can provide an opportunity to learn to grow through their loss in order to experience a hopefulness about their own future. Loss can potentially be either life-changing or identity-changing (Neimeyer et al., 2008; Vickio, 2008). Individuals may find a renewed or entirely different life purpose after experiencing the death of a parent. Again, this is linked to other elements surrounding the loss. Maintaining trust in the world after a parental loss can be difficult for adolescents, especially if previous experiences have already jaded them to believe that the world is a cruel and dangerous place. This is why it is critical for youth to have positive adult influences to guide them through these experiences. Neimeyer et al (2008) remind us that ". . . the goal of grieving is viewed as redefining the relationship so that it can be sustained symbolically, spiritually, or in memory. . . . " (p. 34). Redefining the relationship with the deceased means accepting the death, but accepting the role the parent's life had on the child. Likewise, "it is crucial for bereaved college students to maintain (or regain) a sense of personal control (Balk, 2001, p. 70). During the grieving process, it is not uncommon for individuals to revert to younger developmental behaviors. Finding areas of life where children and young adults can make choices is one way to help alleviate feelings of powerlessness.

The Role of the School

The extended amount of time that students spend in schools, not only daily but over the course of years, greatly increases the likelihood that they will either learn of a death, or experience coping with a death while at school. Charkow (1998) suggested that

a bereaved child is likely to express his or her feelings related to the loss while in the school (elementary or secondary) setting, either in a positive or negative manner. Teachers are frequently primary responders to a child's needs often because of the simple fact that they are present when the child experiences or responds to a crisis. The way in which schools respond to bereaved students is an important reflection on the institution, and contributes to the functioning of students during and after their grief associated with their loss (Hamilton, 2008, p. 77). As mentioned before, the more supportive a community and the fewer changes that children have to undergo after the death of a parent, the better their experience with loss, and the quicker they will resolve their grief.

Not only do schools take up a considerable amount of the child's day, but also there are many different adults with various specialties, personalities, and availability to help the child process his or her loss. Schools often provide a safe haven for children to creatively and directly confront their feelings. It is important to remember that death is a normal part of living, even when experienced by children (Holland, 2004). It should be considered that schools can provide more than basic support through the grieving process, and should be utilized for this assistance. Lawhon (2004) stated, ". . . at any given time in the average classroom, there are at least two students who are grieving from the death of a loved one" (p. 559). This provides children with the opportunity to share their experience with another person facing similar circumstances. For students with a small social network, this opportunity can make a positive difference in helping them overcome their loss.

Parental loss research has revealed that it is possible for a child to cope with the loss of a parent without interaction from an individual with specialized training in bereavement (Fearnley, 2010; Holland, 2008), but an important consideration is that schools be made aware of the death and be willing to respond appropriately. This entails being empathetic to the loss, permitting time to grieve, and being sensitive to the loss when trigger events come up. It is only when the schools and parents are unable to handle this situation that outside agencies should be involved (Holland, 2008). Potential factors that may cause a school to be uninformed of a student's loss may include a child losing a parent over a school vacation, or perhaps prior to transitioning to a different grade level or school district. Schools must respond proactively because "a policy or procedure in place at school means that thoughts as to how to respond have been made in advance, not at the time of crisis when things could easily be overlooked" (Holland, 2004, pp. 24-25). Therefore, this information should be passed along to schools as children move through the educational system. This includes paying attention to college applications where students can indicate having experienced the death of a parent.

Supportive Individuals

Returning to whether death is being considered taboo to discuss, it is often difficult to know how to be supportive of a grieving individual. "The majority of . . . children felt that their school did little to support them on their return following the death of their parent, nor anything to help prepare them for bereavement" (Holland, 2004, p. 23). One potential solution to this issue is to talk directly with students about how the schools can be a helpful responder. "People generally seem to find it difficult to know

how to respond to the bereaved, and as a result they may do nothing and thereby add to the negative emotional impact on the person" (Holland, 2008, p. 414). Yet, grief is not about having the right things to say, but simply about being present with a person who is going through it.

Loss is not limited to one individual, because everyone who had some relationship with the deceased is affected to some degree. Werner-Lin, Biank, and Rubenstein (2009) note that transitioning through a loss may be easier if it is done with others—such as siblings or the remaining caregiver—rather than alone. This brings together the people who share in the experience, and builds a support system that they can turn to as time goes on. "Children's adaptations to these separations is impacted by whether they are given enough information about what is happening, and whether they can access a safe space to process the loss, and express anger and sorrow" (Werner-Lin, Biank, & Rubenstein, 2009, pp. 135-136). Children's needs do not change drastically when they experience a loss or death. They can learn to adjust to new life circumstances, but only as easily as they are allowed to. "Upon experiencing the death of a parent, children need to process and grieve with their own emotions and feelings in their own ways" (Coyne & Beckman, 2012, p.110). Keeping a child from grieving, expressing feelings, or isolating them will undoubtedly have negative consequences, but open and honest communication, freedom of self-expression, and a supportive community will lead to positive results.

When relating this information to the college experience, it is critical for students who have lost a parent to feel as though they belong in the college environment and have

people to turn to when needing to discuss their feelings about the loss. Grief may bring about questions of one's own mortality, and students need to feel that their classroom is a safe space to deal with these feelings (McCusker & Witherow, 2012). The greater the number of supportive individuals in the student's life, the more likely they are to overcome the grief of losing a parent quickly and effectively, and this reduces the chance of leading to further complications.

Potential Ways to Respond to Student Grief

Universities may utilize a number of different methods to help students confront and overcome feelings of grief. The most common support is counseling. For students who have difficulty identifying their feelings, or who may not see grief as a "counseling" issue, other practices need to be in place. Support groups are another alternative, but are less commonly utilized. Janowiek et al. (2005) support the idea of utilizing support groups because they offer validation of feelings and experiences. Challenges with support groups are that the number of participants is limited, and that they are short-term. Several researchers recommend that schools provide grief groups and workshops operated through the campus counseling centers, as well as providing educational material to students about grief and loss, and establishing bereavement policies for students (Floerchinger, 1991; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Again, the response from the school demonstrates the level of care they display for students, which is noted when students discuss satisfaction with their attendance at their school. A supportive community sets a standard of excellence that all college campuses should aim to achieve.

Readily available information about death and the grieving process can help students independently and collectively deal with issues of bereavement. For example, pamphlets can be distributed at various campus buildings and events, and are a simple yet effective tool to utilize. Balk (2001) proposes implementing a university-based center to conduct longitudinal studies on the consequences of unresolved bereavement and the outcomes of interventions to promote bereavement recovery (p. 76). He also suggests "mutual support intervention," and assessing at-risk students (p. 78). In other words, not only should students be seeking out trustworthy adults, but that these adults and university professionals should be seeking out bereaved students to help. These practices have been long-anticipated, but very rarely used. It would be fruitful to investigate the potential success and impact that utilizing such a method would have.

Another alternative response developed by Pearlman, Schwable and Cloitre (2010) is called Integrated Grief Therapy for Children which "allows for flexibility based on the age, symptom presentation, and needs of the child" (p. 1) and recommends that children focus on building coping skills prior to processing memories of the deceased in order to be able to handle the "multiple and distressing feelings" that may arise. This is a common technique utilized in grief therapy that helps ensure that once feelings arise, the bereaved student will have the skills and tools necessary to handle the feelings appropriately. Since grief is a highly individualized process, it is important that the response be as flexible as the variety of potential reactions, as this method permits.

Extending university services so that they are available throughout the school year would allow hesitant individuals to wait until a time when they are comfortable

discussing it. Vickio (2008) recommends more frequent implementation of psycho-educational workshops aimed at educating both professionals and the general student population. The specific functions of these workshops are to provide students with a framework to understand their loss, normalize feelings, interact with others that share this experience, identify options for coping, and identify additional resources (p. 42). Workshops can be a smart idea because they are not limited to a certain population, have the ability to occur more regularly, and can be tailored to fit the needs of the participants.

Shared grief is easier to cope with than doing so in isolation, yet schools rarely utilize this method unless in response to the death of a student. One worthwhile recommendation was made by Floerchinger (1991) who suggested utilizing more educational classes than standardized counseling. This would provide students with the opportunity to share their experiences with others who have similar life experiences, while simultaneously learning normal responses to grief in a safe space. Further consideration should be given to group grieving in response to the death of a student's parents. As mentioned previously in this thesis, the increasing number of parental deaths means that a sufficient number of students have experienced the death of a parent within the past two years. "Memorial services, remembrance markers, . . . and opportunities to share stories regarding those who have died . . . " are just some of the ways that universities can honor parents and create a shared meaning in the student's loss (Neimeyer et al., 2008, p. 32). It is the hope of this author that through the research performed here, this response method will prove to be the most effective method, permitting the most coping to occur and thereby building community among students.

Chapter 3: Methods

The initial objective of this study was to understand how common college rituals and celebrations can create further isolation among students with deceased parents. There are certainly ethical issues that accompany this study, as with any other, that must be weighed against the benefits of exploring student feelings in order to create a more inclusive school environment. These issues relate to the participant's emotional well-being when recalling the death of a parent. One such issue the author prepared for was the possibility of upsetting students by involving them in the research. A potential resolution was to limit the depth of questions relating to the loss of the parent and instead focus primarily on the school's response and any responses that students wish had occurred.

Participants

The desired number of participants for this study was 7 to 10, and that range was met as 8 individuals were interviewed. The participants ranged in age 20-27 years of age, covering both later adolescence and early adulthood life stages, and each experienced the death of a parent either prior to or during their college entrance. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to identify their age, gender, and ethnicity (see Appendix A). This form also included general questions about their age at the time of parental illness (if applicable) and death. This information was used to prepare the researcher to guide the conversation and to avoid any lapse of sensitivity, as to not create an uncomfortable atmosphere for the participant.

Table 3 outlines the demographic information about each of the 8 participants in the study. The majority of participants were aged 25-27, while only two participants were under age 25. Of the 8 participants, 3 were male and 5 were female. Ironically, of these participants, 5 experienced the death of their father while 3 experienced the death of their mother. The majority of participants identified as Caucasian, with only one identifying as African American. Three participants lost their parent more than 7 years ago, while the remaining 5 had a more recent experience within the past 3 years, of which 2 occurred within the year prior to this study. Four of the parents experienced an illness for more than a year, while 2 died suddenly, and the remaining 2 had short-term illnesses. All parents were 45-55 years old when they died. Half of the participants experienced the death of their parent prior to entering college, while the other half experienced the death during college enrollment.

Table 3

Participant Data

	Gender	Current age	Age at parent's death	Years since death	Parents age at death	Parent's gender	Length of illness
Participant #1	Female	27	4	13 years	54	Male	N/A
Participant #2	Male	27	27	<1 year	47	Male	N/A
Participant #3	Female	20	19	<1 year	50	Male	3 years
Participant #4	Female	23	16	7 years	53	Male	1 month
Participant #5	Male	25	23	2 years	50	Female	2 years
Participant #6	Female	27	13	14 years	49	Male	1 ½ years
Participant #7	Male	25	22	3 years	55	Female	2 months
Participant #8	Female	25	23	2 years	46	Female	13 years

Participant Recruitment

Potential subjects were recruited by snowball sampling method; announcements were made both in person and using the social media networking site Facebook. Additionally, this announcement was sent via email to undergraduate students who were enrolled in university courses with thesis committee members (see Appendix B). Researcher contact information was made available to individuals who may be interested themselves or who knew someone who would be interested in participation. Willing participants were given a brief overview of the purpose and procedures of the study.

Research Methods

Interviews were conducted to investigate participants' experiences with losing a parent (see Appendix C). Prior to beginning research, each participant was required to sign a consent form before interviews could take place, acknowledging possible risks and benefits of being part of the study (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted with participants who met the general requirements for the study and who consented to participation. Face-to-face interviews were set up with available participants, while phone surveys or Skype interviews were used for long-distance participants. All interviews were conducted from the researcher's home, where privacy and confidentiality could be ensured. Once the interview began, the participants were audio recorded in order to permit the researcher to transcribe the interview afterward. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were given a debriefing statement (see Appendix E), which restated the purpose of the study, thanked the participants for their contribution, and provided participants with resources should they feel the need to follow up about their experience with a professional counselor.

Transcribing Interviews

First, after the interview was concluded, the researcher replayed the audio and transcribed the conversation. Secondly, in order to ensure accuracy, the researcher replayed the audio while reading over the transcription and made any necessary edits. Next, the researcher looked for common themes and important data that were presented in participant responses. These were analyzed and elaborated on by using data provided by the participants themselves. Based on the results of the themes and responses from

participants, recommendations were made for how colleges and universities can better meet the needs of bereaved students.

Supplemental Information from University Professionals

As a secondary measure, informational interviews were conducted with several university professionals from colleges and universities within the United States. These interviews focused on gaining an understanding of policies and procedures that colleges and universities are currently using to respond to bereaved students. The main objective was to identify if any alternative events are being utilized during family-centered events, and if not, what was preventing colleges and universities from doing so. The selected universities and colleges were chosen at random by utilizing a Google search for colleges and universities with Bereavement Centers. The intention was to find schools that offer a more comprehensive response or alternative events; however, the researcher was not able to find any schools that appeared to meet the criteria. Therefore, from the results lists, the researcher randomly picked a handful of schools from across the United States that offered a variety of bereavement services in order to increase a likelihood of varied results. Virginia Tech was the only college that was specifically chosen, which was due to the researcher's awareness of the school shooting that occurred on campus in 2007. The purpose for their selection was to see if the school had a specialized bereavement policy after having experienced this tragedy. Based on the results from these interviews, findings were made about where the bereavement policy is successful and where improvements can be made.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction to Findings

During this research, 8 individuals were interviewed and discussed the issues surrounding the life and death of their parent in relation to their college experience. As expected, each interview revealed a very unique and complex story. However, many similarities were also shared among participants. It is not entirely surprising that all 10 themes of literary research discussed in Chapter 2 emerged in at least one of the interviews. This chapter will focus on five basic themes: a) Understanding the Child's Perspective of Death, b) the Importance of Communication, c) Compounded Loss, d) the Role of the School, and e) Potential Ways to Respond to Student Grief. In order to emphasize the results, direct quotes from participants will be included.

The following information contains summarized results from these interviews:

- Of the 8 people interviewed, most participants were in their older adolescence. Only 2 participants were under age 25, while all others were aged 25-27.
- Two participants had lost their parent within the past year, 3 deaths were more than 7 years ago, and 3 lost their parent within the past 3 years.
- Five participants were female, 3 were male.
- Seven of the participants identified as Caucasian, and 1 as African American.
- Five people experienced the death of their father; 3, the death of their mother.
- All parents were between the ages of 45-55 when they died.
- Four of the participants had experienced the death of their parent prior to entering college, while the other 4 experienced their parent's death during college.

- Four of the deaths occurred suddenly, while the other 4 were more anticipated.
- One participant is currently postponing her college entrance due to the emotional toll of losing her father. A second participant dropped out of high school and took several years off before finally entering and finishing college, also due to the emotional toll of losing her father.
- Two of the participants described their relationship with their mother as "difficult" or poor. All others expressed a positive relationship with their mother.
- Three of the participants had a strained or absent relationship with their father. All others expressed having an "extremely close" relationship, or being a "daddy's girl," or "best friends" with their father.
- All participants experienced the death of their parent poorly. Some deaths were unexpected, while others were simply "shocking" or traumatic.
- Only one participant did not participate in the honoring of their parent's life.
- Only one participant had any involvement in special events offered by her college following the death of her father. As a mother herself, she used these events as an opportunity to give her children the experience she didn't have.
- Three participants had no involvement in university events even prior to their parent's death (4 including the participant who has not yet attended college).
- Three described intentionally avoiding university events after their parent died.
- Six of the 8 participants identified having certain triggers that remind them of their parent's death: 2 people identified Dad's Weekend, 1 identified Parent's Weekend, 2 people identified Graduation, 2 discussed their wedding day,

2 participants identified other events, places, or reminders, and 2 discussed knowing another person experiencing the death of his or her parent.

- Seven of the 8 participants described having at least one supportive individual. Only 1 participant would prefer not to talk about his grief with others.
- Of the 8 participants, 5 identified counseling as an available resource.
- None of the participants were contacted by the university regarding the death of their parent.
- None of the participants have heard of any alternative events for students who have lost a parent. Four of the participants said that they would attend an alternative event if it existed.
- Four of the participants said they would utilize a Bereavement Center, and another stated that while they would not personally use it, they believe it would be beneficial to other people.

Theme One: Understanding the Child's Perspective of Death

Returning to what we know about the child's understanding of death, it is important to remember that grief is a normal part of life and living. Children need the opportunity to encounter death and experience moving through grief in order to be better equipped to understand it. Death is an opportunity for discussion where children should be encouraged to discuss what their understanding of death entails. Medical terminology or euphemisms should be avoided, as young children do not understand the finality or true meaning of death when they are used. Within the interviews that were conducted for this research, 3 of the participants had lost a parent during their adolescent years or

younger. Based on their interviews, each of these 3 individuals discussed the death of their parent as a shocking, almost traumatic event.

Only 1 participant experienced the death of a parent as a young child. Participant #1, a 27-year-old female whose father died when she was 4 years old, described having a very positive memory of her father before he died. She stated "anytime my dad went anywhere, I pretty much went with him. I learned how to drive a truck with my feet, and I went all the way to California with him before I was even 3 years old." Although her father was gone frequently due to working as a truck driver, their relationship was very special. She recalls the following from the day her dad died:

> What I remember is that my dad had come home and he gave me a kiss on the forehead, and he told my mom he didn't feel well, and he went and laid down, and then the next thing I remember is my mom sitting on top of my dad . . . beating his chest . . . and yelling for somebody to call 911, and the very last thing I remember is screaming "Daddy, wake up, daddy you can't do this . . . Daddy, don't go," as EMS is wheeling him out of the house and they're saying "he's crashing" and not understanding what any of this means, but hearing them say that "he's already gone."

As a 4 year old child, this experience was difficult to comprehend and she was left feeling "abandoned" by her father. While her family was very supportive, the experience of having her father die at such a young age impacted her for many years.

Likewise, Participant # 6, a 27-year-old female whose father died when she was 13 years old, discussed many elements surrounding her father's prolonged battle with

cancer. While her experience with losing her father was anticipated, many of the same feelings and challenges arose. Prior to her father being diagnosed with cancer, she remembered her father as a "strong," "loud," and "big" man. She described having a good relationship with her father, and that after his diagnosis, she and her mother became closer. She remembered watching her father "deteriorate" and beginning to "look like an old man." She distinctly remembered the sound and smell of him dry-heaving, and the experience of watching him lose handfuls of hair at a time. For a teenage girl, it was hard for her to make meaning of these experiences, and although she had experienced the death of both her grandfathers before, she still took this loss very hard. To this day, she has sought out father figures to fill the void ". . . but they all just kinda disappeared." Much like the death of her own father, the continued abandonment by other father figures led to a constant struggle to find meaning in her experience.

Lastly, Participant #4, a 23-year-old female whose father died when she was 16 years old, described her experience as almost shocking due to how quickly it all happened. She described her relationship with her parents as being "extremely close" and "wonderful." When her dad went to the hospital after experiencing back pain, it was discovered that he had non-small cell lung cancer. Within a month, he had passed away. She described regretting not spending more time at the hospital while her father was dying, which was a means of avoiding the reality of the situation, and that ". . . it took like 2 weeks to really hit me" (that he had actually died). Her understanding of death was also vague, as she remembered small discussions about life insurance policies and not really focusing on it because ". . . they were talking like long-term, and they never talked

about it with us because we were just kids." For her, although she worked at her school's Guidance Counselor's office during the time of his death, she never felt the need to utilize the service. As a teen, finding a balance between normality and unanticipated grief was difficult and easier to avoid.

Theme Two: The Importance of Communication

Communication about death can be anything from language used, to issues discussed, to whether or not death is even a topic of conversation within families. Open communication can help lower the child's anxiety about death. However, one issue remains: how soon is too soon to start talking about death with children? Again, communication should be structured to meet the child's understanding of death. In regards to this research, most participants experienced the death of a parent when they were old enough to understand death fairly well. Yet for some, this was their first significant encounter with death, and no experience can prepare or match one for the death of a parent.

In a two-parent household, both parents should be involved in the conversation and preparation of how they will handle the death of their partner. For children in single parent homes, the death of a parent can be even more challenging. Participant #8, a 25-year-old female whose mother died when she was 23 years old, provided a glimpse of how coming from a single parent home and experiencing the death of her primary care giver affected her. She did not have much of a relationship with her father, due to her parent's divorcing when she was young. Her father was often away serving in the military, and was only "in and out" of her life periodically. When her mother became

diagnosed with diabetes, their family had no idea what complications could arise from her illness. Participant #8 recalls that "early on, we kind of acted like it wasn't happening" and they continued to live in ignorance of what could happen. Failure to communicate with doctors on how to manage diabetes, her mother's illness led to a series of other health issues. Her mother suffered many heart attacks, strokes, surgeries, and even a leg amputation as a result. Eventually, her mom became so ill that she ended up moving in to make it easier to care for her. While balancing school, work and caring for her mother, the topic of death continued to be ignored in conversation other than minor talk of her mother's burial wishes. Her mother unfortunately ended up passing away from pneumonia that was hidden by the many other complications. After the death, Participant #8 found herself at a loss to understand her identity, due to no longer acting as a caregiver for her mother and not having a secondary caregiver to turn to. Being her first major encounter with death, she had no previous experience to help her movement through grief.

Theme Three: Compounded Loss

Compounded loss is when death is not the only loss experienced by an individual. It may include having to move houses, schools, or states altogether. It may include loss of finances, loss of identity, or loss of familiar space and people. Within this study, participants whose parents had died prior to their college entrance still found themselves worried about leaving home and adjusting to a new environment. For Participant #3, a 20-year-old female whose father died less than a year ago, the thought of going away to college was actually so overwhelming that she postponed it for a year. She stated "I

chose not to go to attend college my first year out of high school. I did not know what I wanted to do and I didn't wanna change my major 20 times in finding out and having debt, but with my dad, the emotional toll it had on me made it all the worse." One can interpret her story as an attempt to avoid facing compounded loss by taking control over her future and choosing to cope with grief before undergoing additional life-changes.

Participant #4 shared a feeling of anxiety, stating ". . . I remember the anticipation (of going to college) more than anything. You know, because my mom would be by herself . . . I just remember being very, ya know, a little bit nervous to leave home and it was only 2 years after he died that I went to college. . . . " Again, this brings light to the fact that even after some time has passed, the death of a parent can still have significant implications for a child's educational experience. There are many transitions to face during the college years, including identity searching and adjusting to a new community. For some, so many changes happening at once can feel overwhelming and too hard to handle. This is another reason why support and empathy play an important role in grief.

Another example of compounded loss is change in relationships. For Participant #8, "We had so many problems after my mom passed away like with me, I was not getting along with my sisters, and of course my father not being around, and then money and things like that." Familial conflict can cause additional stress on an already uneasy life-changing event. This may be an opportunity to sort out other conflicts, but could also potentially raise new issues between family members.

Lastly, an example of compounded loss can be financial burden. For Participant #5, conflict between him and other family members arose because ". . . they treated it like

it was my responsibility to drop like two grand instead of like just going to college and buying a car and essentially furthering my education. . . . " Instead of focusing on the shared loss that the family had experienced, they chose to focus on financial responsibility. This lack of support undoubtedly created a negative experience for all involved, and only led to further losses.

Theme Four: The Role of the School

With the significant amount of information that students provide on their college applications, one could assume that the university would be aware of any students coming from homes where the death of a parent had occurred. Even if this assumption is not accurate, schools must respond to grieving students with empathy, patience, and sensitivity to potential triggering. However, based on this research, some participants disagreed that the university handled their loss with an appropriate response. Participant #1 remarked ". . . I kinda feel upset that they didn't think ahead of time, cause I mean I did get a lot of money from where my dad passed away to go to college, so obviously it was documented somewhere, and they just didn't take the time to research and do their job properly." For many, the lack of any acknowledgment of their loss is the norm, and others only learn when the student mentions it. Yet with personnel reading files every day, why is it that the school doesn't first reach out to those who have experienced the death of a parent?

Participant #8 experienced the death of her mother near the end of a college semester with a very dissatisfying experience. "My mom passed away what should have been my last semester at [her university], I ended up finishing up that quarter but I ended

up failing two classes, so after I failed those two classes I ended up taking a year off before I went back to classes." Although the university faculty had been aware that her mother was close to dying and that she was caring for her, ". . . they were just kind of really difficult for me at the time, and there just wasn't much support from my professors, but I mean they were aware that my mother passed away." Permitting extra time on tests seems like a fair response, yet fails to consider that grief is not overcome on a schedule.

Participant #7, a 25-year-old male whose mother died when he was 22-years-old, was more impressed by the faculty than the administration, saying that ". . . they understood the situation. Ya know, this was around the time that I had to take midterms for winter quarter, so they gave me like a week-and-a-half or two-week extension to go through the grieving process, study and then take the exams again." This practice can be very helpful if the death occurs near an exam period. Yet although the university may have followed their protocol for a grieving student, imagine the emotional toll the loss of a parent would cause, and being told to instead focus on a college exam.

Participant #4 spent some of her college years as a Teaching Assistant, and stated that ". . . as a teacher, I've had students who have gone through losing parents, and … when that happens you get contacted by the university. . . and I know that they said to make time for that student if they have extra therapy sessions or group sessions or things with counselors, and to be very supportive of that and very sympathetic. . . " While some students may wish to move on in their educational agenda without hesitance, permitting the option to postpone coursework or exams can be a very helpful, sensitive response to student bereavement.

Participant #5 offers a complex outlook on the situation. Although he never utilized any counseling or social networking, he stated "I know that at [two colleges located geographically near each other] both have 'x' numbers of hours with a psychologist. . . or honestly even advisers, like you could go talk to your adviser about something like that . . . I definitely feel like if a student was having a problem with something like that, there are teachers (they could talk to)." However, even with feeling as though he could reach out to the faculty, he described a negative response from the university in that ". . . they didn't even take the time to let me know that I had lost my financial aid until I tried to register for classes. . . " and that therefore he never expected them to be responsive in acknowledging that his mom had passed away or providing any sort of support to him during that time, but also feeling that ". . . I really don't think it's any of their business." While some students may feel that the school is in no way obligated to respond to their loss, doing so would still prove to be courteous.

Theme Five: Potential Ways to Respond to Student Grief

When it comes to bereavement, the simplest thing the school can do is be empathetic to the child. Having an open ear and open mind can be the first step towards closure. Yet not 1 of the 8 participants in this study was contacted by university personnel in response to their loss. As already mentioned, the closest form of acknowledgment were the 2 participants whose parents died near exam time and were offered extensions by their professors. However, neither participant saw this as a positive experience, receiving lowered grades or failing the course. Otherwise, no one from the university contacted any of these participants. For 2 of the participants, the death of their

parent actually led to them removing themselves from an academic sphere altogether. For these students, the lack of response from their school led to believing that they would not be supported in their academic endeavors.

Of the 8 participants in this research, only 2 utilized grief counseling, although 5 identified they were aware that it is available to them. Participant #8 had a positive experience with her counseling, but still remarks "I wish that there would've been more services like maybe some type of group or some type or interaction with other people who had lost parents in college so that we could. . . just to help me remember that I wasn't alone in the process." It is important to remember that grief is easier to overcome when people grieve together, such as a support group.

Another critical piece of information from this research is that 6 out of the 8 participants identified celebratory events as a trigger for them remembering the loss of their parent. Of these 6 participants: 2 identified Dad's Weekend, 1 identified Parent's Weekend, 2 identified Commencement, 2 discussed their wedding day, 2 participants identified other events, places, or reminders, and 2 discussed knowing another person experiencing the death of his or her parent. Participant #4 stated that "I think the hardest times was just Dad's Weekends . . . that was always a really hard day, and I think for all except for one year in college I just came home for Dad's Weekend instead of staying in school for that. That and getting ready for Father's Day, I mean those are always the big days . . . " Often times holidays and anniversaries can be the most difficult for a bereaved student. These are the times when a greater amount of support can be more helpful.

Going along these lines, only Participant #1 had any involvement in special events following the death of her father. Participant #1, now a mother herself, utilized family events as an opportunity to give her children the experience she did not have with her father. Yet 3 of the research participants mentioned intentionally avoiding celebratory events after the death of their parent because these events triggered memories of their loss. Participant #8 gave a very detailed description of how celebratory events triggered memories of loss for her. "I was in The Union, and it was Parent's Weekend and I remember just being like really upset because there were so many people with their parents. . . and I actually got my mom a shirt that said "[her University Name] Mom" and I saw so many moms with that shirt, and I just remember I got really really upset that day just because it was that emotion of knowing that there were so many people with their mothers and my mom just was not there." Remembering that not all students have a relative to participate in family-centered events is the first step towards creating alternative events that would provide inclusion to all of those who are affected.

Family-centered events, or lack-thereof, can play a significant part in the grief process for bereaved students. Four of the 8 participants in this research attended a college or university where Parent's Weekends and other celebratory events did not even exist. After dropping out of high school following her father's death, Participant #6 discussed her struggle with the college experience. She attended two different universities, but neither of them offered any sort of resource for bereaved students, and did not even host a Parent's Weekend event ". . . 'cause they were so small." Yet due to the minimal amount of celebratory events, Graduation was a highly extravagant event.

This only led to feelings of exclusion. ". . . You graduate every year because that's the kind of college it is. And so, for my college graduations, I really wished he was there." In response, the university could have acknowledged her situation by creating inclusion and support during these events.

Similarly, Participant #1, 2, and 5 all attended a local 2-year college, which also does not host any familial events. However, this college is close geographically and socially with a larger 4-year university. Participant #1 even acknowledges how ". . . especially in the [university name] community, a lot of it is family oriented and to have something for people who have lost a loved one . . . it would definitely enhance their college experience." Unfortunately, a separation exists between these facilities, pushing the 2-year college community away from events hosted by the larger 4-year institution. Likewise, Participant #2 discussed that ". . . I didn't pay attention to their [local 2-year college's] activities, and I knew when [larger 4-year institution] did theirs cause they're a much larger school, they announced about their activities, but being that I didn't go to [to that university], I didn't participate in their activities either." Perhaps if the larger 4-year institution extended an invitation to the 2-year college students, the two could unite and build a stronger community.

Not one of the 8 participants had heard of any alternative event for students who have lost a parent. Alternative events would include things such as a Celebration of Life memorial on Mother's Day, Father's Day or other family-oriented events. It would include acknowledgment of losses around holidays and anniversaries of the death. Alternative events could also include recognition of parents that have died at graduation

ceremonies or other scholarly events. Four of the 8 participants said that they would attend an alternative event if they existed at their school.

Likewise, 4 of the 8 participants said they would utilize a Bereavement Center if it existed on campus. An additional participant stated that while s/he would not personally use it, that it would be beneficial to other people that they know. A Bereavement Center could utilize workshops, support groups, educational pamphlets and counseling for those needing it. Likewise, students could work at the center offering peer support and comfort to others. Participant #1 remarked, "I think the more information and the more support out there for people who have lost a loved one, the better off it would be because not everybody knows how to deal with it and not everybody can afford to go to a counselor, and not everybody wants to go and see a counselor, they just wanna take care of it their own way." Additionally, Participant #4 stated, "Just because I might not have used it doesn't mean I wouldn't have gotten involved. . . . I would have liked to have volunteered there and been there to talk to people who've had that happen to them."

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

Now that we have taken a look at first-hand accounts into the struggles that occur with the death of a parent, it is time to evaluate what schools can do to be more responsive to student grief. The first recommendation is to have university procedure and response to bereaved students reevaluated to ensure that bereaved students are being served and that it is in the manner they wish to be served. Once a specific policy is in place, students should be notified of what to expect as a response before the situation arises. Secondly, while colleges and universities are offering a fair amount of resources, the manner in which they are made available to students could be restructured so that schools are reaching out to students rather than waiting for students to seek help. A third recommendation is to publicly recognize the death of student's parents as university-sponsored events and to offer alternative events for those who feel they cannot attend a traditional university event. The creation of a Memorial Site could also help publicly display the university's acceptance of a student's grief, allowing access for students to grieve at any time, with anyone. Fourth, the development and utilization of a Bereavement Center is recommended so that students can have a specific place to go and talk with people who can help them manage their grief. Lastly, within the Bereavement Center, peer counseling and support groups could be established so that students wishing to talk with a peer rather than a counselor can have that choice.

In regards to appropriate response to bereavement, one factor that contributes to ineffective response is the presumption that bereaved students are either receiving enough support at home, or that they should be the one to initiate contact with a trained

professional if they are truly in need. However, it is important to remember that the death of a parent is not always the only loss that students face. Several of the participants in this research discussed parentified roles resulting from the illness or death of a parent. Some participants acted as a caregiver to their dying parent, furthering the burden of grief. Others were even expected or required to pay for burial costs. Death of a parent often brings about challenges to the child's identity, or difficulties in relationships with others. Families are not always communicating about what the death of a parent can mean for a child, which can make an unexpected death even more difficult. Children who are experiencing death for the first time, or who experience a complicated illness may find it to be rather overwhelming. Thus, it is critical to remember that the death of a parent is sometimes easier to handle than the other complications that follow it. Therefore, schools should try to be as supportive as possible. Schools are full of teachers, faculty, and administration personnel that all come from different backgrounds with different personalities and expertise. Schools can see these differences as a strength that can be used to help students in all kinds of life situations, even bereavement.

In order to be mindful of whether or not bereaved students are successfully being cared for, current practices and policies can be evaluated for effectiveness and appropriateness. Also, schools can see whether the policy that is in place is being followed or not, and may be able to find areas for improvement or suggestive changes from those who practice it. A first step in this endeavor would be to reach out directly to students who have experienced the death of a parent prior to college and to those who they are aware are currently facing the death of a parent. This could entail having

administrative personnel speak to classes at the beginning of the school year to seek out these students, and several other times throughout the school year. Once these students are identified, a Needs Assessment can be conducted to determine the level of care they need, if any. This can range from informal counseling with a peer advocate to specific bereavement counseling with a licensed worker. A Needs Assessment would allow for students to report their areas of concern, and since bereavement is an individualized experience, would allow for students to express whether or not their specific needs are adequately being met. Follow-up can be provided by a worker in the Counseling and Psychological Department if they feel that the student needs more help than they are reporting.

Table 4

Example Needs Assessment

Description: You are being asked to participate in a Bereavement Needs Assessment. The purpose of this questionnaire is to determine the level of care (if any) that would be most beneficial to you, after experiencing the illness or loss of a parent.

T= True. F= False

1. I have experienced the death of parent/caregiver.	T	F
2. I currently have a parent/caregiver with a terminal illness.	T	F
3. I feel I would benefit from finding people to talk with about my experience.	T	F
4. I would prefer to speak one-on-one with somebody about my experience.	T	F
5. I would prefer a group setting with others like me to discuss my experience.	T	F
6. I feel I would benefit from talking to a certified counselor.	T	F
7. I feel I would benefit from talking with a peer who has a similar experience.	T	F
8. I feel that my experience affects my social life and involvement.	T	F
9. I feel that my experience affects my academic career and performance.	T	F
10. I feel that my experience affects my personal abilities and interests.	T	F
11. I feel that my university/college has appropriately responded to my situation.	T	F
12. I feel that my university/college has an interest in my well-being.	T	F
13. I feel that I would benefit from alternative activities during ceremonious events such as Parents Weekend & Graduation	T	F
14. I feel the university Counseling Ctr. provides effective assistance to my needs.	T	F

Please describe any additional concerns or suggestions that you have regarding your college experience and the university's response to your loss: (write in response here).

Rather than waiting for students to reach out for help, perhaps schools can be doing more to reach out to their students first. It is important to recall that not one of the 8 participants in this research reported being contacted by university administration personnel in regards to their loss, and only a few discussed their professors as being available to help them, with very mixed responses about whether they were truly supported. The five colleges and universities that were interviewed all relied on the student seeking assistance rather than the other way around. Perhaps an alternative would be to assign an employee to seek out students first. Virginia Tech Counseling Services host outreach events to promote their services, which is an important method in helping students know what resources are available to them. One suggestion might be to have Admissions Counselors market their services when conducting visits to high schools, or when students come to visit the university. Particularly, college and university administration workers should pay a great deal of attention to college application forms where students identify coming from widowed or single-parent households. Perhaps one option might be to include pamphlets for the Counseling Services in the admissions packet. By including this information in Admissions Packets, the school can draw in students who were hesitant to apply or accept admissions, or can at least provide a comforting impression with potential students. This would set the school apart from other higher education facilities as a place of belonging and acceptance. Marketing any kind of individual or group counseling, workshops or other bereavement resources through other university departments can increase participation and effectiveness of the services.

When speaking with colleges and university personnel, Dr. Trevor Richardson, Assistant Director of the University Counseling Center at Oklahoma State University, remarked how in the event of a student's passing, the school would reach out and contact friends and families of the deceased. The school would also extend counseling and support to those affected by the loss. This response is an important acknowledgment that schools can partake in, and holds very little risk in participation. Responding to a student's death demonstrates concern and support. Schools may consider extending this type of outreach for students who experience the death of a parent. If people are the most valuable resource that a school can offer, then they should be treated with the respect that their loss is a shared loss within the school community. Communication between families and schools can help the student feel more accepted and important.

Perhaps a more difficult but potentially necessary consideration would be for universities and colleges to implement a more elaborate bereavement policy for students. As discussed in this research, 2 participants experienced the death of a parent close to exams. While their professors offered extensions, one of these participants still ended up failing two of her courses. The other participant's grades were lower than his average due to the stress he was facing. Perhaps it would better serve the university to permit students a bereavement leave or excused absences from exams under such circumstances. Likewise, universities should evaluate their policy in regards to students being permitted to drop classes past deadlines under such trying times. Many employers offer some form of bereavement leave in the event that an immediate family member dies, and universities should follow suit, especially since many students have to travel to attend funerals, and

can be faced with additional hardships such as financial issues, along with the normal tasks of grieving.

One way that schools can support students in their bereavement is to offer as much assistance as possible. For students facing compounded losses, it is crucial that schools be understanding of their predicament. Norman Keul, a Dean at Duke University, discussed how their school can be very accommodating to students, allowing them to postpone work, reduce coursework, providing "incomplete" grades for the semester and allowing a leave of absence if the death occurred in the middle of a semester. Likewise, Amber Eversole at Virginia Tech also discussed how the dean of students can assist students in withdrawing from courses if the burden is too great for them to continue. Their counseling center can also help students by advocating to the Residence Life faculty if a student needs to move out of the residence halls and return home. With such an accommodating response from the school, bereaved students can feel better equipped to focus solely on their loss and journey through grief rather than worrying about how their education will be postponed or negatively affected. Having a specific bereavement policy, although challenging, can prove to be an effective tactic to helping with grief. Since it is better to be prepared before something happens, colleges and universities can begin evaluating their practices now in order to make effective changes for the future. Letting students know what to expect from the university might help decrease anxiety for students who are uncertain about how to react to a loss of a parent during the school year. While coursework and exams are important aspects of college life, allowing students to focus on bereavement first can be a weight off their shoulders.

To reiterate, 5 of the 8 participants in this research identified their Counseling Services as a place that they knew offered resources to bereaved students, yet only two of the eight participants utilized counseling for support. This suggests that there is something more that can be done to reach out to bereaved students. At Oklahoma State University's Counseling Services, they provide a grief library to students at no cost. The more access to information about grief and illness a student can have, the better equipped students can be to handle death. Formal counseling is not the only solution to grief because counseling is not right for everyone, and still holds a certain stigma that prevents people from accessing it. Therefore, colleges and universities may find it necessary to evaluate the implementation of alternative events during celebratory events sponsored through the school in order to create more inclusion for those students who have experienced the death of a parent.

The main focus of this research was to understand how university celebrations effect students who have experienced the death of a parent. Six of the 8 participants identified celebratory events as a trigger for them remembering the loss of their parent. Of these 6 participants: 2 identified Dad's Weekend, 1 identified Parent's Weekend, 2 identified Graduation, and 2 discussed their wedding day. For these students, schools should recognize how family-centered events may create feelings of exclusion for such individuals, and should strive to find alternative ways for them to feel welcomed in the events. One suggestion might be that the university or college hold alternative events for bereaved students, such as a memorial service where students could light a remembrance

candle in their parent's honor. These alternative events could be open to all students who would like to show their support.

Likewise, public recognition of a student's loss may provide a sense of inclusion in community events. While many events (e.g., football games, orientation, move-in day) permit attendance by relatives, there should also be acknowledgment that not all family members are still living or able to attend. For example, a Father's Weekend football game can offer a moment of silence for the dads who are not alive to attend the event, or perhaps Graduation ceremonies can offer a remembrance marker such as a poster or program page honoring the parents who cannot attend the celebration of their child's transition. These simply gestures may impact an entire population of otherwise overlooked individuals, and can allow the community to grieve and bond together.

Another suggestion might be to create a memorial site which would be more accessible to students throughout the year, such as the anniversary of the death. This would be especially helpful to students who live far away from the parent's burial site, or for those whose parent was cremated. While universities cannot control the response from other students, it should strive to make the environment one of acceptance and warmth. A public memorial site could allow invitation for others to express their condolences and well-wishes for students.

Colleges and universities often offer a Counseling and Psychological Department that can provide counseling and support to students who seek additional help. Again, these departments often rely on a student's self-referral rather than proactively seeking out individuals. If Counseling Services are unable to handle the tasks of responding to

bereaved students within their own scope of practice, or if such a center does not exist at the school, it may be beneficial to explore the option of establishing a Bereavement Center. As mentioned earlier, a Bereavement Center could offer workshops, support groups, educational pamphlets and counseling for those needing it. Barb, an Office Manager and Minnesota State University's Counseling Center, discussed how their center works with the residence halls to promote their counseling services. The center provides a workshop series, many of which help with transitional skills such as time management and test anxiety, but also can help students cope with bereavement after the loss of a family member. These additional services can help reduce the stigma of counseling and of grief as being a mental health issue.

Dr. Irwin Sandler, a Research Professor from Arizona State, discussed their university's Family Bereavement Program. This program offers a dual-component reaction to student loss, first focusing on helping the surviving caregiver and secondly helping children and adolescent of the deceased. Their participants are made up of families that have experienced a parental death with children between the ages of 8 and 16. They provide 12 counseling sessions working on effective parenting techniques for the remaining caregiver, and teaching coping skills to the children. The participants are recruited through community referrals, such as: teachers, school nurses and counselors, and hospital workers. When asked if there was any reason the program did not extend into the college population, Dr. Sandler could not provide a reason why not other than maybe no one had ever felt there was a need, but possibly could be recommended for implementation. While it is helpful that they are helping younger children work through

grief prior to college, it would be beneficial to extend the services to those on their own campus. Other colleges and universities can also implement such programs, providing a more comprehensive, family-centered response to death. This can help make the death easier for all those affected.

If universities and colleges cannot afford to invest in a Bereavement Center for whatever reason, the school should consider other avenues for helping bereaved students. In this instance, it is important to market many underutilized resources, such as Residence Life or Campus Ministry. These resources are already put in place and are geared towards establishing a sense of community among college students; so it would be only logical to use them. For those who hold religious views, it can be important for the school to acknowledge the role of the church in their bereavement. While only 1 participant discussed religion as a part of her coping, many others may find it to be helpful. However, if schools wish to utilize Campus Ministries as a tool, consideration should be given for different religious views. Residence Life workers can utilize their position to promote healthy coping skills and availability to those seeking assistance.

Lastly, students could work or volunteer at the Bereavement Center offering peer support and comfort to others. Students could undergo informal training, such as some students do to become Resident Assistants or Survivor Advocates to those in abusive relationships, or the Safe Zone advocates offered at Ohio University that provides support for Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgendered (LGBT) youth. The university could offer courses aimed at training students to respond to those dealing with death and bereavement. Since counseling has an attached stigma, many students consider it an

inappropriate reaction to their loss; yet many are open to the idea of talking with a caring and well-informed peer about their issues.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, understanding of the college experience for students who have experienced the death of a parent. Yet more importantly, schools must be willing to respond to the recommendations made by students, as well as those presented in this work and others. In order to ensure that change is created, students must speak out and make their needs known to colleges and universities around the country. Advocates must take charge of implementing alternative responses to create a more inclusive environment. Administrative workers must make it their priority to reach out to their students, understanding that their needs for inclusion and support are of the utmost importance. We must continue to teach bereavement techniques to others so that they can provide support to others and be better equipped to handle such a loss if they ever face it themselves. Understanding the bereaved student's experience can lead to a better experience for everybody.

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Appendix A: Participant Data Sheet

Your Gender:

___ Male ___ Female ___ Transgendered ___ Prefer not to answer

Parent's Gender:

_____ Male ____ Female ____ Transgendered ___ Prefer not to answer

Your Ethnicity (optional):

___American Indian or Alaska Native

___ Asian

___ Black or African American

___ Caucasian

___ Hispanic or Latino

___Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

___Two or more races

___ Prefer not to answer

Age:

Your Current Age: _____

Your age when parent was identified as terminally ill (if applicable): _____

Your age at time of parent's death: _____

Your school grade at time of parent's death: _____

Parent's age at time of death (if known): _____

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Announcement

Hello, my name is Chrissy Edwards and I am a second-year graduate student in the Child and Family Studies program at Ohio University. I am currently seeking participants for a research study regarding the college experience for students after the death of a parent. Willing participants must be between the ages of 18-26, and have experienced the death of a parent prior to or during college.

This research aims to identify ways that schools currently address the potential isolation that may occur for students of deceased parents during celebratory and common college events. Based on the information provided, recommendations can be made as to programs or resources that should be made available to these students. Willing participants may contact the researcher at (440) 829-8354, or at ca167006@ohio.edu.

Appendix C: Basic Interview Questions

1) Tell me a little bit about your relationship with your parents while growing up?

2) Tell me about the first day you arrived at college?

Your first year experience? Second year? Third? Final? Graduate studies?

3) How old were you when your parent died? Tell me the story of his/her death.

If anticipated death: What illness was it? What was the prognosis? How long after diagnosis did they pass away? Did you have access to information about their illness prior to their death? If parent died unexpectedly: How did you learn about the death?

4) How did your family honor the life of your parent? (i.e. funeral, memorial service) Were you permitted to attend? Did you choose to? Did your family talk about death prior to or after it occurred? Did you discuss any death-related issues? With whom?

5) In your college experience, did you ever think about your parent's death? What caused this? How did you react? Who did you turn to during this time? How did they respond?

6) What resources (if any) are you aware of to help a student facing the death of a parent?

7) Did anyone from the university contact you after the death? How would you describe/rate your satisfaction with the university's response to your loss?

8) What was your involvement in Parent's Weekend/Mom's Weekend/Dad's Weekend? What did you do to celebrate/avoid this? Did anyone from the school contact you about alternative events? Has anyone ever discussed such things that occur at another college?

9) How do you think the existence of alternative activities or acknowledgment of your loss would have impacted your college experience differently?

10) Would you attend a support group for bereaved students? Would you utilize a

Bereavement Center? Educational courses? Brochures? Workshops? Why/why not?

Questions for University Professionals

1) Does your university have a protocol for responding to the death of a student's parent? If so, what?

2) What sorts of services does the university provide to students facing this issue?

3) Have students expressed satisfaction or dissatisfaction with these services? Have they ever asked for alternative responses?

4) What prevents the university from implementing other alternative responses or events?

Appendix D: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Family Centered Events & Bereaved College Students
Researcher: Chrissy Edwards
Faculty: Jenny Chabot, Joan Jurich & Cynthia Anderson

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you for your records.

Explanation of Study
This study has been designed to help identify how college rituals that involve celebrating with parents may create isolation among students who have experienced the death of a parent.
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to talk about your experience with losing your parent and how the school responded to your loss. You will also be asked to assess the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with this response, and to provide valuable feedback detailing what the school did successfully or how the school could have responded differently.
You should not participate in this study if you have extreme difficulty in discussing your parent's death, or if you feel that it may trigger an extreme emotional response. This study is not meant to provide support or assistance through the grieving process and is only meant to evaluate the school's responsiveness to the death.
Your participation in the study is expected to last approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in an Alden Library meeting room.

Risks and Discomforts
Risks or discomforts that you might experience are generally related to evoking memories of the death experience. There are no physical risks anticipated. While this research will ask intimate questions relating to the death experience, it is primarily focused on the school's response to a bereaved student in order to determine if an inclusive community exists, and if not, how to better develop one. Therefore, every effort will be made to create a relaxed environment.

Benefits
Collectively, this study is important to society because it will provide valuable feedback relating to how schools can be more inclusive of students who have lost a parent during ceremonious events. Individually, you may benefit from discussing your experience with losing a parent, in remembering and honoring your parent and their involvement in your

life. It is possible that you may not benefit personally by participating in this study if there was a strain in your relationship with your parent that may be agitated by discussing their death.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential by destruction of recordings post-transcript, and by assigning a number to each participant rather than directly linking personal information to the content provided in personal interviews.
Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact:
Chrissy Edwards, researcher, (440) 829-8354 or at ca167006@ohio.edu
Jenny Chabot, adviser, (740) 593-2871 or at chabot@ohio.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- You have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- You have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- You understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- You are 18 years of age or older
- Your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature _____Date_____
Printed Name_____

Version Date: 5/5/14

Appendix E: Debriefing Statement

Thank you for your participation in this study. The information that you have provided will be used to make recommendations to colleges to increase the sensitivity to students who have faced the death of a parent when developing and implementing ceremonious family events.

Should you experience any concerns that you wish to further discuss with a qualified mental health specialist, it is recommended that you contact either Ohio University Counseling and Psychological Services, located at Hudson Health Center 3rd floor, at (740) 593-1616 or Hopewell Health Centers, located at 90 Hospital Drive, at (740) 592-3091. If you need assistance after regular business hours, the 24 hour crisis hotline number is (888) 475-8484.

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