CHAPTER THREE

Learning Through Loss: The Impact on Student Retention for Grieving Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact grief has on post-secondary students and the support institutions can provide to help them be successful in their programs. Grief can manifest in several ways, often depending on the type of loss and relation the individual has to the deceased. This paper examines the literature informing our understanding of the types of grief students can face, and the impact it has on their sleep, social connections, and academic performance. There is a growing need to understand what institutions can do to support grieving students, especially because recent research has shown this to be an issue affecting more students than some would believe. Grief can not only cause students to struggle in the classroom, it can also cause difficulties connecting to their school community, which is one of the retention factors found in student attrition models. Current supports from institutions and faculty, on-campus housing (residence), and social support programs in the school community are studied to understand how they can assist grieving students. On-campus supports for grieving students can link to retention theories, and in turn, these services could positively impact program completion for these students as well.

Keywords: Mental Health Problems, Grief, Student Retention, Post-secondary Education.

Introduction and Research Questions

Post-secondary school can be a time of significant change in students' lives. For traditional students, this can include learning to cope with heightened academic pressures while living away from home for the first time. Mature students can face challenges relating to balancing childcare and/or work while adapting to a routine of studying, writing papers, and taking exams. Regardless of age, these students must all contend with the typical responsibilities of adulthood while keeping up with their studies. Outside of day-to-day life, acute challenges such as losing a loved one can have particularly severe impacts students' lives and wellbeing. In some cases, grief affects the post-secondary community at large with the loss of a fellow student or staff member, while in others, individuals are navigating a personal loss.

It is essential to study how grief affects students because research shows it is more common than one may think. Balk (2010) estimated between 22% and 30% of undergraduate students are within their first year of a grief process, and between 35% and 48% are in their second year. More recently, Lipp and O'Brien (2020) estimated between 40% and 70% of students will experience the death of a family member or a close friend while they are in post-secondary school. Grief can be a difficult area to offer support for since there is no "one size fits most" model for it—everyone's grief is unique (Thai & Moore, 2018). Students struggling financially can get a student loan, those needing to modify their course load can speak to an academic advisor, etc.—but grieving students do not have specific support such as these on campus. Because grief is a normal part of life, some students may not feel the need to access counselling services to support them through the process. Regardless, grieving students may still struggle to meet academic expectations or maintain social relationships, so this support should be made available.

Grief for post-secondary students is important to research because it can affect nearly every part of their life, including mental and physical health, and academic performance. When experiencing grief, students are more likely to become socially withdrawn and may have issues fulfilling their academic responsibilities (Flatt, 2015; Hedman, 2012; Prior, 2015). For example, some grieving students report losing motivation to study, resulting in missed classes and skipped assignments (Balk, 2010; Cupit et al., 2016; Flatt, 2015). However, grief has also been found to build resilience (Schwartz et al., 2018). For some, a loss encourages them to appreciate their college experience more.

Grief may also cause students to feel disconnected from the community of their institution. Tinto (1975) explored the importance of community at post-secondary institutions with a Student Attrition Model (SAM), which examines campus relations and campus interactions. According to this model, students who develop a meaningful relationship to their post-secondary campus are more likely to finish their programs than those who do not (Browne & Doyle, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Developing a better understanding of how the SAM relates to grieving students and the unique barriers they face could help institutions develop programming to support them.

The purpose of this paper is to help readers understand how grief impacts post-secondary student experiences and what institutions can do to assist these students in their time of need, and how their retention can be improved. Specifically, the research questions I will address are:

1. Does grief impact a student's program completion in post-secondary?
2. What supports can post-secondary institutions provide to improve the retention of grieving students?

My personal reasons for exploring this topic are explained below, followed by an overview of the literature addressing what grief looks like in post-secondary students. An explanation of retention theories and how these two subjects are related is then provided. Finally, a critical analysis is performed to examine the range of supports currently provided to grieving students in the classroom, in residence, and in the school community.

Personal Rationale

Nearing the end of my sixth Masters of Education course, I received the news that my Dad had suffered a cardiac arrest and was on life support. After eight days, we decided to withdraw medical care, and my Dad passed peacefully on July 17, 2018. I had no idea what it would mean for my course. I still had two assignments left; my brain was anywhere but with school when I spent time with my Dad and planned the funeral afterward. I reached out to my instructor, asking what my options were for the course. She let me decide what would be best for me and offered several options for finishing the course, or to withdraw from it without academic penalty. She facilitated the paperwork for me, saving me the stress of navigating the school's website to find whom to contact and what paperwork to fill out. I decided to continue in the Fall because "life goes on," and I wanted to finish my program.

Shortly after losing my Dad, Caleb—an eight-year-old boy I had coached in bowling for the previous two years—unexpectedly passed away, adding even more weight to my emotional burden. When winter registration began, I realized I needed a break and had to focus on my grief; I did not have the energy to go to work or school or be a partner while grieving. I needed something off my plate, so I committed to a year-long leave of absence from my schooling and returned in September of 2019 to finish my program.

Knowing I could not be the only student to experience grief, I became interested in understanding how commonly grief occurs among post-secondary students and what supports were being offered to help them continue their academic journey. Grief had shaken my world: I went from being an extremely organized and well-planned student to relying on text reminders when assignments were due, and often forgetting commitments I had made. I was only a part-time student when I lost my Dad and found it hard to stay on top of a reduced course load. I imagine full-time students would have even more of a challenge—especially undergraduate students who have just left home for the first time and are navigating a significant life change already.

Literature Review

This section begins by examining different types of grief, and the impact they may have on students. A discussion of Tinto's (1975) student attrition model (SAM) and subsequent research assessing student retention follows, including how grief impacts students' decisions to continue with or withdraw from their programs.

Types of Grief

There is no such thing as a "normal grief" process (Thai & Moore, 2018), but the majority of cases are classified as *acute* or *typical*. Acute grief typically lasts between six months and two years; throughout this time, the individual learns to resume daily life without much disruption; however, even after this time, significant events and anniversaries can trigger a resurgence of grief (Cox et al., 2016; Cupit et al., 2016; Servarty-Seib & Taub, 2008, Thai & Moore, 2018).

A common misconception about grief is that there are distinct “stages” for the bereaved to go through, based on the “five stages of grief” model introduced and popularized by Elisabeth

Kubler-Ross in 1969 (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). Kubler-Ross's stages are depicted as a linear pathway starting with denial, moving into anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Shortly before her death, and nearly three decades from her original work, Kubler-Ross and her research partner Kessler (2014) clarified the purpose of the stages was supposed to help identify feelings and emotions of grief descriptively and was never intended to be a linear process or a prescriptive trajectory for processing loss. It was always expected that any one individual would flow through the stages in different ways and may bounce between them. Given the popularity of the five stage model, it is essential to clarify the misconceptions of it that are based in a simplistic interpretation that grief is a clear and straightforward pathway to walk.

Modern theories on coping with grief include Stroebe and Schutt's (1999) dual process model of grieving, which understands grief to bounce back and forth between *loss-oriented* and *restoration-orientated* processing. Loss-oriented processing deals with the emotions associated with the loss, whereas restoration-oriented processing learns to adjust to the world without the deceased (Stroebe & Schutt, 1999). This model is not linear; it is expected that those grieving will oscillate between modes of being emotionally consumed by their loss and resuming with their daily activities. It is typical for people to spend more time in the loss-oriented process earlier in the grief process, but spend more time in the restoration-oriented process as time goes on (Storebe & Schutt, 1999). The dual process model of grieving thereby describes the "back-and-forth" emotions that grief can bring in an intuitive and easy to understand way.

There are situations where grief continues beyond the typical timeline for acute grief, and it becomes known as *complicated grief*. Complicated grief describes when the bereaved struggles to move forward from their loss and face difficulties resuming a typical life after the initial period

of acute grief (Hardison et al, 2005). They often have pre-occupied thoughts about the deceased and can have difficulties controlling their emotions and accepting of the loss. Those experiencing complicated grief are likely to experience physiological symptoms such as insomnia (Hardison et al., 2005). While acute grief is a natural part of life, complicated grief has brought a debate into the world of psychology as to whether this specific process should be a classified as psychological disorder (Neimeyer et al., 2008). Complicated grief is most common in those who have lost their next-of-kin (Murrell et al, 2018; Neimeyer et al., 2008). Therefore, post-secondary students who lose a parent or sibling could fit into this category.

The Impact of Grief on Students

The duration and intensity of emotional and mental health impacts experienced by grieving students can vary depending on the type of grief (Arizmendi & O'Connor, 2014). Because typical or acute grief is a normal process that everyone must deal with, it is rightly not considered a sign of mental disorder. But while the distinction between complicated grief and typical grief has been established, no mental health conditions are currently connected to complicated grief either. While complicated grief can be especially arduous and eventually manifest into a major depressive disorder, it requires further study before a decision is made about adding it to the DSM (Arizmendi & O'Connor, 2014).

Insomnia

Grief can take a toll on physical health, and particularly on sleep. While it is more common for those suffering from complicated grief to experience long-term sleep difficulties, those

experiencing acute grief can also struggle with it (Neimeyer et al., 2008). Lack of sleep causes more than the experience of fatigue; it can cause tangible health issues including a weakened immune system, slower cognition, elevated risk of cardiovascular illness, and a negative impact on mental health (National Health Service, n.d.).

In a survey study of 508 bereaved students and 307 non-bereaved undergraduate psychology students, Hardison et al. (2005) found that students with more complicated grief symptoms exhibited signs of insomnia most often among the sample group. The rate of insomnia in the non-bereaved group was 17% of students compared to 22% of those who were grieving (Hardison et al., 2005).

It may not be possible for students to treat their insomnia themselves; they may need to seek support from a health professional (Neimeyer et al., 2008). While there are medications that can help with sleep, they are not recommended as the first treatment. Post-secondary students should become aware of the ways their sleep hygiene might be negatively impacting their ability to sleep at night (Neimeyer et al., 2008). For example, students should not be using their bed to study and only use it as a place to sleep, sleep schedules should be followed to the best of their ability, and naps should be avoided (Neimeyer et al., 2008). Needless to say, grieving students facing more sleep difficulties as a result will have more difficulty resolving it, and in turn could face additional health challenges that negatively impact their post-secondary experience.

Academic Adjustment and Social Support

Academic adjustment and social support are two areas grieving students may have additional difficulty, and research suggests they influence each other. Cousins and colleagues

(2017) conducted an internet survey of 225 randomly selected post-secondary students throughout the United States, 84 of whom had experienced a loss in the previous two years. They found that those who were bereaved and had avoided emotional coping were more likely to struggle with academic adjustment and social support, but those who used active emotional coping with friends (e.g., venting, sharing feelings) were more likely to seek social support.

However, finding social support for grieving students can be challenging. Balk (2001) found some students were uncomfortable supporting grieving peers because they were worried about the burden it might create for themselves, and felt little obligation to offer support for their peers. On the other hand, Parikh and Servarty-Seib (2013) found that these views may have been changing a decade later with a qualitative survey of 23 student participants at a Midwestern university in the United States. Some participants believed they should listen because it could help their friends and give them a chance to express their loss. As indicated by Cousins et al. (2017), this could be helpful for grieving students both socially and academically. However, , like Balk (2001), they found some participants were worried about the risks of supporting a peer, including the fear of their feelings by bringing up painful memories and that they would not know what to say because they lack a similar experience.

Research also shows that grief can negatively impact academic outcomes. Roberts (2016) conducted a survey study of 272 undergraduate students at a Christian University in the United States that had experienced a personal loss, using the 32 question Holistic Grief Scale, which measures the physical, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive impact of grief on a scale of 1 to 10, and some additional questions about academic experience. She found that students were likely to miss class (*OR= 1.92*), and even more believed grief impacted their GPA (*OR* = 2.10; Roberts, 2016).

A decrease in attendance and declining grades may cause students to doubt whether they want to continue their program. Roberts' (2016) study found that as participant's Holistic Grief Scale scores increased, the likelihood of considering withdrawal did as well.

Faculty Support

Post-secondary education can be an intimidating, unfamiliar environment for incoming students. Grieving students have the extra challenge of coping with a loss while making the other adjustments typical to life as a student. Some worry about the flexibility of faculty to accommodate them (Cupit et al., 2016), but faculty usually do recognize the impact grief can have on students. For example, Hedman's (2012) survey of faculty found 90% understood how grief could impact a student's academic motivation.

On the other hand, faculty may not be trained on how best to support grieving students. Furthermore, if the student does not disclose their circumstance to the faculty member they will not be able to support the student simply because they are not aware of it. Disclosure could be difficult for students who find professors intimidating or who are concerned about privacy. Nonetheless, research suggests faculty should attempt to establish themselves as trusted sources and invest in the student's successes to encourage such communication (Flatt, 2015; Servarty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

Overall, it is grief can significantly impair academic performance and class attendance for undergraduate students. Although students may not disclose their situation, it is something for faculty to consider as a possibility for why a student has stopped attending class or begun to struggle academically.

Individual Grief Experiences

Research is often designed to capture what is common across individuals so that results can be generalized to a population. But as Urabe (2020) noted, each experience of grief is personal and unique; therefore, studies of grief should not seek to generalize, but rather to understand each individual's unique experiences. Using narrative interviews with twelve students who lost someone important to them while in post-secondary, she explored their experiences as a student, how the loss impacted them, and what helped them cope with the losseach student's experience was different. While some common themes were identified, the overall duration, intensity, and coping mechanisms were unique to each participant.

The following examples of participants in Urabe's (2020) study showcase the unique academic challenges grieving students can face outside of their non-grieving peers, and the kinds of supports they need:

- For participant "Claudia" (a pseudonym), her academics began to suffer after a loss, and it was recommended she take a break from her program. However, Claudia was determined to prove her grief would not dictate her program outcome and persisted with the mindset of proving her doubters wrong.
- "Jessica" was grieving a traumatic death and found her anxiety escalating, which took a toll on her friendships and ultimately led to a breakup with her partner, showing the social impacts grief (especially complicated) can have.
- After doctoral student "Rokit" lost grandmother whom he had been a caregiver for, his supervisor recognized that academics were not the priority at that moment and was flexible with deadlines so he could have time to grieve (Urabe, 2020).

As can be seen in Claudia's story above, grief does not always negatively impact schooling; sometimes it can help students feel more connected to their post-secondary experience. In a mixed-method analysis of college students' experiences with grief at a comprehensive regional university (n = 950), Cupit et al. (2016) found that 44% reported that college became more meaningful after losing a loved one. While this does suggest that grief does not always have a whole negative impact on post-secondary students, how/whether this manifests in their academic performance remains unclear.

Grief and Student Retention

Student attrition models (SAMs) look at student campus interactions as a factor in student retention. They acknowledge the factor academics play in attrition, and conversely explore the demographic of students for whom academics does not seem to be a driving factor as they withdraw despite meeting program requirements. If a student is motivated, academically successful, and enjoys their program, their reason for leaving likely comes from a source outside of classroom performance (Manyanga, Sithole, Hanson, 2017).

In 1975, Tinto began exploring students' attrition in higher education as a function of institutional failure rather than student failure. It was widely believed by schools and researchers at the time that if a student failed, it was because of their behaviour and/or academic performance (Tinto, 1975). Tinto argued instead that attrition is a longitudinal process and our understanding of it cannot discard the socio-psychological background and lived experiences that a student brings to college/university. For example, if a student has lost a loved one, this cannot be left at the door

or forgotten, and cannot be measured in any admissions process, but it may influence the student's decision or ability to continue their education.

Pascarella and Terenzi (1980) thereafter sought to validate Tinto's theory, collecting data across six studies of random samples over a three-year period. They found that social and academic integration was a statistically significant factor in a student's decision to stay or leave post-secondary school. Furthermore, the informal connections students developed with faculty members were consistently influential on students' decisions to persist or not. Contrary to Tinto's theory, they also found that background characteristics such as where a student comes from did not influence retention one way or another. However, this was not to say Tinto was entirely wrong; students may still have difficulties connecting socially on campus because of their grief but not recognize it.

Students first entering post-secondary school are typically at a critical point of personal development. Erikson's (1963) theory of development identifies adults between the ages of 19 and 40 as in the "intimacy versus isolation" stage, a time when one's identity is developed and intimate relationships are formed—or fail to be formed, resulting in isolation. Intimacy does not necessarily refer to romantic relationships here; it can relate to any meaningful relationship. Students who are grieving may be more likely to isolate themselves because of the physical and emotional, and mental toll their grief can cause. Without developing intimate relationships, they are missing out on developing social supports. Therefore, institutions need to have supports in place for all students to develop these relations.

Overall, the literature shows that grief negatively impacts most students' experience in post-secondary education, including detriments to their physical health, social experience, and

academic performance. When relating this to retention theories, it seems to follow that grieving students would be more at risk for attrition because of the academic struggles and social difficulties that grief can cause. Institutions should use this data to develop campus supports to assist grieving students in successfully completing post-secondary programs.

Critical Analysis and Recommendations

Knowing that grief can impact students physically, mentally, and academically, post-secondary institutions should ensure their campus is aware of ways to support them. Support within the classroom is essential to assist students academically. Faculty and resident assistants are two prominent staff members on campus who could be a student's first contact when disclosing their loss. Furthermore, specific campus programs such as support groups can provide a sense of community and support among grieving students.

Classroom and Institutional Support

One of the concerns grieving students have is they will not receive academic support (Roberts, 2016), but students are likely to develop a relationship with faculty over their time in the class, and this can make the faculty more approachable for the student and the faculty more open to offering accommodations (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). Faculty are the lynchpin of in-classroom support, and their openness to supporting students beyond the initial loss could help retain grieving students. Some faculty may not be aware of the prevalence of grief among the student population; in multiple studies, faculty have underestimated how many students on their campus have experience a loss (Balk, 2008, Cox et al., 2016; Lipp and O'Brien, 2020). The first

step in faculty supporting grieving students is to make sure they know the frequency and duration of typical grief so they are better able to support students. Faculty have the opportunity to offer tangible support that could help a grieving student be successful, including modifying assignment due dates and allowing make-up exams where it is deemed appropriate (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

Hedman (2012) surveyed 112 post-secondary faculty on their attitudes towards grieving students. While 93% reported they would offer to reschedule an exam if the death happened the same week, only 52% said they would if the death was within one month, and just 24% would if it occurred within the same term (Hedman, 2012). While the initial support following a death is helpful, it shows faculty members are less likely to be accommodating as time goes on, despite the longer trajectory of typical grief.

In light of Pascarella and Terenzi's (1980) research on the impact faculty and student connection can have on program completion, it could be argued that faculty's response to a grieving student could be highly determinative on whether or not they want to continue their program. A student receiving support from faculty could help develop the relationship between them, while being denied could hinder it. Connecting this to Erikson's (1964) theory on development, the rejection of support could impact a student's desire to develop intimate relationships with others if their needs were not met during a time of need. In turn, they may not ask other faculty for support and could feel unsupported by the institution as a whole based only on one faculty member's reaction. If faculty receive training on how to support grieving students, they may feel more confident and be more aware of how to assist students past the initial period after their loss.

Institutions can introduce policies to ensure consistency in expectations and support for all students. One example of this is the Grief Absentee Policy developed at Purdue University, for students who need to leave school for a funeral. Based on their relationship with the deceased and the distance they need to travel, the student is granted a certain amount of time as an excused student (Purdue University, n.d.). The students cannot face any academic penalty for taking this leave and may have the option to demonstrate their understanding of the course competencies differently at the faculty member's discretion (Purdue University, n.d.). This policy is beneficial for grieving students because it only requires them to consult with one individual at the Office of the Dean of Students, who then informs all affected faculty about their loss instead of needing to deal with all of their instructors individually. Furthermore, it makes student services aware of the student's grief, and support staff can follow up as need be.

For students whose grief requires them to take a longer break, institutions could benefit from policies to support students. In a journalistic article by Peterkin (2012), she describes the experience of Patrick Cho, a student who took a leave of absence from school when his mother became critically ill with advanced multiple sclerosis (AKA Lou Gehrig's disease), leading to her passing. Cho explains that the school had him submit a leave of absence form to his associate dean outlining his decision to leave his program and when he expected to return, similarly requiring the student to only reach out to one contact at the institution. And because it provides a timeline of when the student is expected to return to their program, this can trigger support staff to reach out to the student when the return date approaches to see if they need help transitioning back to school.

Tinto (1975) argued that students who might withdraw from higher education can be influenced to stay by the support they receive from an institution. Classroom and institution

support are therefore crucial for retaining grieving students. The academic impacts of grief can be overwhelming. Whether a student is unable to complete work or needs to step away temporarily, having support available ensures the student knows is aware of this allowance, and that the institution cares about their plight. While Purdue University's policy is a great start, it fails to encompass support for students outside of the initial period of loss. It could be beneficial to have grieving students able to register with accessibility services for a period of time, so they have an advocate for the accommodations they require.

Residence (Campus Housing) Support

Residence provides an opportunity for students to live within the school community. It may therefore impact student retention, because it is a place where students have the opportunity to have a consistent connection with others outside of those in their classes who are still students. These connections could improve student retention by helping students feel welcomed (Pascarella & Terenzi, 2019).

Resident Assistants (RAs) have a unique position in post-secondary education as both a student and staff member, and may be some of the first to notice a change in a grieving student's behaviour because they see them regularly (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). In a qualitative semi-structured telephone interview study of 12 resident assistants in Ontario, Flatt (2015) found the majority of participants (10 of 12) had supported a grieving student, yet none had received any professional training for it. Despite this, they all knew of resources on campus where they could refer the students.

Grieving students may spend more time in their room, suffer from insomnia, and are more likely to make trips home than others (Cupit et al., 2016; Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Hardison et al., 2005, Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). This presents an increased risk of isolation, which could limit their ability to form relationships with their peers. However, these behaviours may act as a cue for RAs to inquire about their situation. Resident assistant training programs should therefore be modified to include information on grief and training on how to identify and support grieving students (Cupit et al., 2016, Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Flatt, 2015; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

For example, Peer Hero Training is an interactive video training program designed to dramatize various situations an RA may encounter (such as substance abuse). After each option is selected, the video debriefs the RA of the outcome and provides the opportunity to try a different answer if they want to know how else it could have played out (Thombs et al., 2014). This methodology may be a better option for RA training than others like roleplay scenarios, where there is no guarantee the individual playing the resident knows how the situation would plausibly play out in real life. Thombs et al. (2014) found strong evidence for Peer Hero Training with respect to certain issues: RAs who were randomly selected for the training responded to alcohol-related and drug-use-related first-aid situations 10 times more often and 14 times more often, respectively, than those who participated in a traditional face-to-face training. The Peer Hero Training module appears to be a successful way for RAs to practice dealing with realistic scenarios, and so it could be modified to include modules with training on how to identify and support grieving students.

However, even with adequate training, RA support for grieving students has limitations. The symptoms of grief are similar to other mental health conditions, making it difficult for RAs to

distinguish grief from other psychological difficulties. As Tinto (1975) explains, students' decisions to stay at school can be impacted by life outside of the classroom, and residence gives an opportunity to see what some of these impacts could be. But RAs may not feel comfortable providing support for grieving students, especially if the death has also impacted them, such as the death of someone in their community. Therefore, RAs should know where they can refer students for on-campus for support.

Peer Support Groups

Grief impacts nearly every aspect of a student's life, and this in itself can be isolating, especially when they do not know other peers going through something similar. Research conducted with administrative staff from 46 universities and colleges in the United States suggests that little has been done to address the problem of isolation for students experiencing grief (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012). Multiple studies show that grieving students want to receive support from their peers over a professional counsellor, yet only one of the schools in these studies had a peer support group for bereaved students (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012; Roberts, 2016; Balk, 2001).

In contrast to Fajgenbaum et al. (2012), Prior (2015) observed a college campus grief group called Actively Moving Forward (or AMF), which aimed to open chapters on multiple college campuses at the time of the study. There were 33 chapters in development and 45 active groups, showing that not only did peer support groups exist, but they continue to grow. AMF allows students who have experienced a loss to participate in a monologue and dialogue-based support group facilitated by support staff, typically from counselling services (Prior, 2015). Students have the opportunity to share where they are at in their grief process (monologue), and the facilitator is

to let the conversation flow as naturally as possible. Facilitators can set rules to help the students move forward with grief, such as for every negative thing they say, they must counteract it with a positive thing (Prior, 2015).

These studies suggest that students need a space to share their grief and receive support to feel connected to their school community, and institutions can help by making these spaces available. Not only can peer support groups be a way to develop a social support system, they can also be cost-effective since they require little or no staff to facilitate (Fajgenbaum et al., 2012). Even if a staff member facilitates, it is still a cost-effective way to support students as one staff member can assist multiple students at once within a central location.

Students themselves may create their own support groups. Urabe (2020) observed a "Death Café" group facilitated by a student who had experienced loss, advertised on-campus but taking place off-campus at a coffee shop. An off-campus location could be beneficial because students may feel more comfortable sharing their experience in a casual environment, but it also may be a barrier for students who do not have transportation to the location, and therefore should be set up close to campus. In this group, students were encouraged to share their stories but were welcome to simply listen if they weren't comfortable sharing. Urabe observed that new students started feeling more comfortable over a couple of months and began to share their experiences more. Although quiet at first, it is clear these students were invested in the Death Café because they kept coming back. When the group facilitator announced she was moving, another student stepped up to take over again, exhibiting students' investment in the support group.

Peer support groups could also help with student retention. As Tinto (1975) described, students carry what is happening in their lives with them onto campus. Institutions should therefore

offer spaces for peer support groups to gather and acknowledge what they are going through. The support groups can allow students who have been resilient with their grief to share their experiences with those struggling (Schwartz et al., 2018). This openness could help students form connections with others, which in turn can help students feel more connected to their campus environment and community, which plays a part in student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Therefore, it can be assumed peer support groups may positively impact student retention.

Regardless of whether the group is on or off-campus, students need to know it exists in order to access it. Therefore, it is up to the facilitators or the institution to assist in promotion to ensuring the target audience receives the information. Making faculty and RAs aware of the groups available could be a great starting point considering they are likely to be a first contact for the bereaved.

DISCUSSION

Limitations

As the author, I should first acknowledge my personal bias in writing this paper. Having experienced grief throughout my master's program, I recognize that my personal experiences have shaped my views and direction of this research, limiting objectivity. Another limitation is a lack of demographic data explored. There could be different experiences of grief in other cultures or geographical areas, but the majority of research in this study came from the United States post-secondary institutions in the United States. Therefore, even if we assume generalizability in contrast to Urabe's (2020) argument, these limitations indicate it should not be anyway.

Future Research Recommendations

There is limited research on grief in post-secondary because it has historically been assumed to not be a prominent issue (Balk, 2008). This may partly be because grieving students have not identified themselves and, in turn, could not be made aware of the supports available to them. Future research should explore practical ways for students to identify their grief at any time in their academic journey. In this report, grief was limited to the loss of human life. However, grief can be mourning the loss of many things, including a relationship, a pet— or in recent times the loss of "life as we know it," such as living through a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is an excellent opportunity for researchers to explore how different life events may influence retention.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore how grief impacts students' post-secondary experience and what institutions can do to support them. It has been found that grief can have physiological, social, and academic impacts on students. When examining Tinto's SAM of retention and Erikson's theory of development, grieving students may be at risk of leaving their programs because of difficulties making connections to their school community and peers. There are several options institutions have for supporting students in and out of the classroom. Instructors should be educated on the duration of grief and its impacts on academic performance in hopes they can be more accommodating for assessments. Institutions should strive to introduce policies that provide support for grieving students to help instructors understand how they can be supportive. RAs are likely to be among the first and most frequent to contact a grieving student and should be trained on how they can offer support; this may best be done through a digital program that offers realistic

role-playing scenarios. Furthermore, peer support groups can create a sense of community for grieving students. These supports can in turn reduce attrition among these students.

Grieving students can struggle to find their place in post-secondary education. Death and loss are not the end of a journey; but the beginning of a new one for those surviving. Post-secondary school is an opportunity to learn and grow. It may be an opportunity for grieving students to do this more so, especially if adequate academic and social support is available to steer them towards success.

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