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# Understanding Bereavement in a Christian University: A Qualitative Exploration

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**Oral Roberts University**

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### Abstract

This phenomenological study based on Ecological Systems Theory measures the college student bereavement experience in a Christian university. Participants included 127 undergraduate students, ages 18 to 23, from a small, Christian university located in the Mid-West who provided answers to open-ended questions about their experiences regarding college following a death loss. The qualitative data are analyzed using open and axial coding and organized into three major themes: (a) priority and meaningfulness of college, (b) experience of college, and (c) suggestions for colleges on how to better assist grieving students. Results indicate that students are generally successful in adapting to bereavement and that they prefer an environment open to discussing death and asking difficult religious questions. Suggestions for Christian university administrators and counselors are provided, with implications for secular college counselors, utilizing an ecological systems perspective.

### Understanding Bereavement Experience in a Christian University: A Qualitative Exploration

Life on a college campus characterizes both general and distinct experiences. For some, campus engagement represents a stage in students' life span of increased social emphasis, movement away from family to peers as the core group of relatedness, and increased community focus. Within these common characteristics, the culture of the university, as embedded in its central mission, values, and goals statements, interacts with the campus climate to create a potentially unique experience for its students. University campuses that adhere to a specific religious value system, namely Christian, are even more likely to develop highly specific cultural environments. Though research measuring culture and environment on religiously affiliated college campuses is scarce, empirical findings suggest a qualitatively unique environment in Christian universities (Bryant, 2009; Walker, Hathcoat, & Noppe, 2012), and this may have important implications for grieving students.

The challenges associated with dealing with bereavement on a college campus in general are not new to literature. Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008) discuss bereaved students' experiences from an environmental perspective. Grieving students' peers may desire and attempt to be supportive (Walker et al., 2012), but they may not be comfortable discussing losses (Balk, 1997); these findings are concerning in an environment in which peer relationships are central. Researchers have measured risk factors of close losses (Servaty-Seib & Pistole, 2006; Noppe, Servaty-Seib, Parikh, Walker, & Martin, 2011; Walker et al., 2012) and potential problems meeting immediate educational goals (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006) and have thus called for university engagement in bereaved college students' experiences (Balk, 2008; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). To better understand how universities may be more engaged, we believe that it is

necessary to examine the interactive relationship of student with environment and propose that using an ecological systems framework is instrumental in this process.

Ecological Systems Theory, originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (2005a; 2005b), conceptualizes factors in human development and behavior by considering overlapping systems of influence ranging from those most central to an individual's experience to those most peripheral. The ecological perspective has been utilized to explain a number of adolescent issues, including sexual activity (Van Horne, Weimann, Berenson, Horwitz, & Volk, 2009; Corcoran, 2000; Meade, Kershaw, & Ickovics, 2008), parental relationships (Gallegher, 2002; Jordan, 2005), and educational outcomes (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Nichols, Kotchick, Barry, & Haskins, 2010). Noppe (2009) recently used Ecological Systems Theory to interpret the college student bereavement experience.

In Noppe's (2009) interpretation, the microsystem consists of students' dyadic relationships with professors and roommates, and the mesosystem consists of an interaction of several dyadic relationships, such as student with parent, roommate, and professor. The exosystem places these interactions within the broader context of the institution, which is nested in the broader macrosystem of culture and even broader historical context, or chronosystem (Noppe, 2009). This interpretation led to the first college student bereavement research that we know of focusing mainly on environmental factors (Noppe et al., 2011), and some minor differences based on institutional type were found. The study measured only secular universities, however.

Within the ecological framework, a variation in any portion of any level triggers a ripple affecting the entire system (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). An institutional variation in culture, for instance, affects the macrosystem, which then interacts with historical context, influences

professors, and ultimately affects students' individual experiences. Religious values closely align with cultural beliefs and expectations, so a university affiliated with a particular religion may constitute a qualitatively unique culture. Indeed, some research has supported this notion (Bryant, 2009; Walker et al., 2012). To understand bereavement within universities, students' experiences must thus be considered within their particular cultural context.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The vast majority of college student bereavement literature has measured secular campuses, and we cannot assume that effective university engagement in the experiences of grieving students will be the same at Christian universities. This exploratory study has thus been conducted for the purpose of (a) contributing to the growing body of college student bereavement literature, (b) developing a better understanding of the personal experience of bereavement for students specifically at Christian universities, and (c) interpreting the results within the context of an ecological systems framework, providing suggestions for university administrators and counselors in assisting bereft students. A study was conducted in a Christian university; the qualitative portion of that study is presented here.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does the role of college change in the life of a student experiencing a death loss while enrolled at a Christian university?
2. How does a death loss affect a student's experience of college at Christian universities?
3. How might Christian universities and their counselors better equip students to effectively deal with a death loss?

### **Methods**

This research was conducted as part of a national study and incorporates a non-experimental, internet survey design for the purpose of better understanding the college student bereavement experience and confirming what prior studies have found regarding prevalence of college student bereavement (Balk, Walker, & Baker, 2010). The current study utilizes a phenomenological, qualitative design (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007) with interpretation through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory. The study includes data from one university to understand college student bereavement within the specific context of a Christian university culture. The research was approved by the university's IRB and was conducted in a manner intended to protect the ethical rights of the participants.

### **Participants**

Participants were undergraduates from a small, Christian university (enrollment about 3800) in the Midwest recruited via availability sampling. The study contained a total of 442 participants, 197 of whom experienced the death of a family member or a friend in the last 24 months. This indicates a prevalence rate of approximately 45%. The sample contained 77% females, and ages ranged from 18 to 23 ( $M = 19.89$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ,  $n = 195$ ). First year undergraduates comprised 27% of the sample, sophomores 28%, juniors 25%, and 21% seniors, making the participants well distributed across classification ( $n = 197$ ). Racial/ethnic identification was also diverse, with 21% of the sample African-American, and 65% reporting that they were white. No other category exceeded 5% ( $n = 197$ ). The sample represented the population generally well in terms of year in school and racial/ethnic identity; participants underrepresented males, which compose 43% of the university undergraduate enrollment. Religious preference was distinctly homogenous, with .05% (1) preferring Orthodox Catholicism, 1% (2) preferring Judaism, 4.2% (8) preferring none, and 94% (177) preferring

Protestantism. About 90% of the sample reported living on campus ( $n = 196$ ). About 72% indicated that the death resulted from an illness and about 18% from an accident. About 4% indicated uncertainty about the cause of death, 3% indicated death by murder, 1% by suicide, and 2% by “other” causes.

### **Procedures**

Through the Registrar’s Office, all undergraduate students were sent an email from the principal investigator, informing them of the study and requesting their participation. A link to the online survey was provided in the emails. The first page of the website included a consent form, and participants were required to check whether they agreed to participate; if so, they were taken to the next page with several demographic questions. The last question on that page asked whether participants had experienced a loss in the last 24 months. If they answered yes, students were directed to a series of questionnaires assessing: (a) classroom experiences, (b) social experiences, (c) resources utilized, (d) psychological issues, and (e) open-ended questions about the experience of the loss in college. Some chose not to respond to the open-ended questions; those who did respond ( $n = 127$ ) were included in this analysis (Walker et al, in press). If they answered no, students were directed to a page thanking them for their participation and inviting them to enter a drawing for a free \$50 certificate to the university bookstore. Thus, we utilized convenience sampling to derive the original sample and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to narrow down participants for the current study. After data collection was completed, one participant was randomly selected and awarded the certificate.

### **Measurement Instruments**

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants responded to background questions regarding their date of birth, sex, year in school, racial/ethnic identity, religious preference, types of losses

experienced in the last 2 years, and whether such losses were family members or friends.

Bereaved participants were asked about their closeness to the deceased on a likert-type scale (1=not at all close to 5= very close), the age of the person, how many months had passed since the person died, and the cause of death.

**College experience change questionnaire.** Participants received three open-ended, interview style questions and were asked to answer as honestly and completely as possible. The questions were: (a) since the death, did your priorities with respect to college change? Has college become more or less meaningful to you?, (b) since the death, has your college experience changed? If yes, how?, and (c) what suggestions do you have for what colleges or universities can do to help bereaved students?

### **Analysis**

Informed by a constructivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1998), suggested as an effective perspective through which to view bereavement experience (Neimeyer, 2006), phenomenology has been considered to have particular utility in counseling research (Morrow, 2007). We employed a holistic approach to the analysis (Patton, 2002), remaining particularly sensitive to the role of religion embedded within several layers of contextual systems nested in a Christian university setting. We sought to detect patterns for possible establishment of meaningful generalizations that might be applicable to other culturally similar universities. Creswell's (1998) discussion of qualitative analysis informed the steps taken to analyze data from the college experience change questionnaire.

Response data logically emerged from the three presenting questions for participants as the following three major themes: (a) change in priority of college, (b) change in college experience, and (c) suggestions for colleges. Within these themes, researchers formed thematic

categories and subcategories utilizing open coding to organize the array of responses, followed by axial coding (Creswell, 1998) to identify links between the labeled codes or categories, combining them in some cases. Researchers then identified subsidiary categories within these themes. This process resulted in a hierarchical list of codes, which was edited to remove redundancy while maintaining detail, and the data were reviewed again to verify that all data was organized within the existing codebook. Categories within the code “change in priority of college” included: (a) more meaning, (b) less meaning, and (c) depressive responses. The code “change in college experience” diverged into sub-codes: (a) habits and relationships, (b) behaviors and perspectives, (c) ongoing loss experience, (d) motivation, (e) view of university, and (f) religious views. “Suggestions for universities” contained sub-codes: (a) services, (b) college culture change, (c) administrative policies, (d) social support, and (e) education. See Table 1 for more detail. After finalizing the codebook, the researchers determined the extensiveness of each theme in terms of its frequency of emergence from interview data, in addition to the depth and richness of the experience, as shared in participants’ responses.

Two family studies researchers and a psychology student researcher worked together to identify patterns and emerging themes from the open-ended questions. After one researcher identified a list of codes, the second researcher reviewed the themes to confirm them and make further suggestions for possible codes, a process that helped to ensure dependability of the codebook. This type of cross-validation continued through the data analysis process until the codebook was complete and both researchers agreed that no further editing, in the form of combining or restructuring codes, was needed. Finally, a third researcher reviewed each step in the entire process to develop the final codebook and again verified the accuracy and logical emergence of codes. The use of triangulation of researchers (Patton, 2002) ensured verification

and credibility of the resulting codebook.

## Results

Participants' responses were coded according to the themes discussed in each of the sections below. Some participants (25% of sample;  $n = 32$ ) referred to more than one overarching theme in their answers to at least one of the three questions and were assigned more than one code. Thus, frequencies describe number of times the themes emerged across the entire group collectively. (See Table 1 for codebook.)

### Priority of College

For the most part, students appeared to successfully negotiate the role of college in their lives following a death loss by adapting or constructing new meaning. Participants ( $n = 127$ ) reported various responses to the question, "Since the death, did your priorities with respect to college change? Has college become more or less meaningful to you?" Most ( $n = 54$ ) students found no change or more meaning, 16 indicated depressive responses, and 3 found less meaning.

**More meaningful.** It appeared to be important for some to involve themselves in things that would honor the dead person, and in many cases succeeding in and completing school honored them. One 20 year old female indicated:

Ever since my friend died, I feel the need to go beyond my fears and just do my all to learn and walk out my future as a missionary. I learned that life is to be lived to the fullest, and I try to do that with God as my strength.

Others derived meaning from increased appreciation for friendships in college. One 20 year old male student stated, "I do my best to take every day as a gift, and I cling to the life I have for right now. God has blessed me with (university) and the wonderful friendships I have here. In a way, I feel more at home here than I do anywhere else." Those indicating

experiencing more meaning had a mean of 10.61 months since the death and a mean closeness to the deceased of 3.57. Among these students 6.9% ( $n = 3$ ) lost their loved ones to murder, 18.6% ( $n = 8$ ) to accidents, and 76.7% ( $n = 33$ ) to illnesses.

**Depressive responses.** Frequently, students commented about emotions that characterize depression or some of the initial reactions to the loss. These responses did not necessarily represent a shift in meaningfulness of college but instead suggest emotional reactivity associated with the loss itself. One 19 year old female student said, “College is college. It doesn’t mean anything to me. I’m just here. Floating on in life.” Another 21 year old female student said, “I still cared about how I did, but I could not bring myself to try harder.” Those who fall within this code may be the most likely to benefit from services and/or interventions provided by colleges and universities. The mean time since loss was 9.35 months, smaller than any other group except those who found less meaning. The mean closeness to the dead person was 4.41, higher than any other group. Illness was the cause of death for 76.5% ( $n = 13$ ), and accidents caused the death for 17.6% ( $n = 3$ ).

**Less meaningful.** In some cases, students found that relationships outside school had become more important after the death experience, making college itself less of a focus. For example, one 19 year old female participant said, “My education is still very important to me, but sometimes I sacrifice studying to be with my family and friends.” Another 21 year old female student stated:

I’ve tried to make it more meaningful to make my father proud of me but sometimes I feel like it could be a waste of time. It’s only stressing me out to be surrounded by people who do not understand what I’m trying to say. College has become my life before God but this time instead of making money and learning how to do business, I am putting

myself in debt trying to learn something I already know for a piece of paper that will say I am "trainable" in the outside world.

The mean time since the loss for these reporting less meaning was 8.22 months. The mean score for closeness to the dead person was 3.8, and 10% ( $n = 1$ ) lost the person to murder, 30% ( $n = 3$ ) to accidents, and 60% ( $n = 6$ ) to illnesses.

### **Experience of College**

There are sometimes when I feel like I don't want to do anything, especially study.

...My dad passed away less than 2 weeks ago, and I missed over two and a half weeks of school while he was in the hospital. I am behind so I have a lot of makeup work along with present assignments to complete...I honestly don't want to do anything, but I know that I have to get it done (20 year old female).

The results presented here comprise answers to the question, "Since the death, has your college experience changed? If yes, how?" In the current sample, 51 indicated no change, 27 indicated changes in social habits and relationships, 16 suggested changes in behaviors and perspectives, 15 reflected on ongoing experience of the loss, 11 reported changes in motivation, 4 discussed a change of view of the university, 3 had changes in religious views, and 70 either did not respond or provided a response that could not be coded.

**Change in social habits and relationships.** Many students reported changes in their social lives in terms of different levels of strengths and involvement. Students' responses indicated both stronger and weaker relationships; one 20 year old female student said, "I thought college would be a safe haven, but it turned out not to be. Everyone always says that the friends you make in college are the ones you keep for life. When I was in my darkest hour, the people I considered to be my friends abandoned me." Another 18 year old female student said, "Yes, I

am much more careful who I allow super close to me and to just be careful about the level of self disclosure with certain people.” The mean time since loss of these 27 students was 9.5 months, and the mean closeness to deceased was 4.07. Of the students reporting these changes, 37% ( $n = 10$ ) reported losses due to accidents and 63% ( $n = 17$ ) due to illnesses.

**Change in behaviors and perspectives.** This code is defined in terms of those personal changes in habits, goals and values, of which appear to characterize a general shift in perspective or attitude resulting from the loss. As one 18 year old female student indicates, “...My perspective (has changed). Sometimes I think, (friend who died) didn’t get to go through this experience which she would have wanted to, so why am I disliking it so much and going through it huffing and puffing sometimes?” The mean time since the loss of these 16 participants was 10.19 months, and the mean closeness to the deceased was 4.06. Six percent ( $n = 1$ ) lost a loved one to suicide, 19% ( $n = 3$ ) to murder, 13% ( $n = 2$ ) to accidents, and 63% ( $n = 10$ ) to illnesses.

**Ongoing experience of loss.** Several students reported reflections of their own ongoing attachments to the dead person. One 21 year old male student indicated, “There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about my grandmother.” Another 20 year old male student reported, “I feel more sad and distant sometimes. I have good days but also bad days. It makes me not want to be as involved as I was before his death. It’s also hard because people don’t know what to say when they approach me.” The mean time since the loss was 8.67 months, and the mean closeness was 4.53. Seven percent ( $n = 1$ ) lost a loved one to murder, 7% ( $n = 1$ ) to an accident, 80% ( $n = 12$ ) to illness, and 7% ( $n = 1$ ) unknown.

**Change in motivation.** Though many students reported decrease in motivation, some indicated an increase. One 21 year old female student said, “I see more purpose to my education. It is no longer a means to get a career, rather a step towards accomplishing my goals.” The mean

time since the loss was 8.72 months, lower than any other group except those having ongoing experiences with loss, and the mean closeness was 4.09. Eighty-one percent ( $n = 9$ ) students reported illness as the cause of death, 9% ( $n = 1$ ) was unknown, and 9% ( $n = 1$ ) had missing data.

**Change in view of the university.** Some students reported having a desire to move on with life past the university and having anger and/or blame of the institution. For example, one 21 year old female student said, “I hate the rules. I feel constricted. I want to move on, get a job, and be an adult.” The mean time since loss was 12.33 months, and the mean closeness to the dead person was 5, which is the highest mean of any code. Twenty-five percent ( $n = 1$ ) lost a loved one to a murder and 75% ( $n = 3$ ) to illnesses.

**Change in spiritual/religious views and habits.** Though participants who provided responses for this code were few in number ( $n = 3$ ), their words were intense.

Since the deaths in the past 2 years...my view and college experience has changed dramatically. It was through these circumstances that I learned that no one is safe or ever will be safe. Anything could happen to any person at any moment, and there is nothing we can do to change that. All we can do is trust in the Lord, and that is enough. When you realize that a person can never be guaranteed safety and happiness, and that we can't always “pray away” bad things, I think there is a loss of innocence that one might never get back. Though the Lord has brought much healing, I still and perhaps always will see the world a little grayer, with less color, less hope (20 year old male).

Another 21 year old female student said, “(My) college experience has changed for the better. I have stopped drinking and doing drugs. I don't worry or get stressed very often. I believe a lot of that has to do with my transfer to (university) and my relationship with God.” The mean time since loss was 15.33 months, suggesting that time may accompany more deeply personal,

cognitive, and/or internal changes associated with loss. The mean closeness to the dead person was 3.33, 33.3% ( $n = 1$ ) student lost a loved one to murder, while 66.6% ( $n = 2$ ) lost the person to illness.

### **Suggestions for Colleges and Universities**

The data in this section represent responses to the question, “What suggestions do you have for what colleges or universities can do to help bereaved students?” In this sample, 50 participants made suggestions about services, 29 about university culture, 22 about administration, 21 about social support, 4 about education, and 86 either did not respond or provided a response that could not be coded.

**Services.** Responses making suggestions for university services covered a variety of topics, including counseling, support groups, referral systems, bereavement programs, and church/ministry. One 21 year old female student explained, “We can usually bond with people our own age better, and (dealing with grief is) better if we feel we are not being forced and we feel comfortable talking to someone who can’t prejudge (us) and punish (us) if (we) are coping an a way that (they) don’t like.” Having proper referral systems, especially highlighting outreach, was a common theme among the responses. One 18 year old male student explained:

My only suggestion would be to figure out some way to reach out to those who have closed themselves up and isolated themselves following a death, for many times these are the people that need help most but will not seek it of their own accord. As it is right now, these programs can only help those that ask for it, but there are many people too hurt, sad, afraid, angry, or depressed to ask for it but who desperately need it.

The mean time since loss was 9.84 months, and the mean closeness to the deceased was 3.72.

Four percent ( $n = 2$ ) students lost their loved ones to murder, 14% ( $n = 7$ ) to accidents, 76% ( $n =$

38) to illnesses, and 6% ( $n = 3$ ) to unknown causes.

**University culture.** Responses here involved discussion about changing the university culture to openly discuss death and dying more and offer more supportive attitudes. Several students suggested that everyone should take the time to notice hurting students more. One 22 year old female student said, “Pay attention to changes in behavior. Create an atmosphere of love and trust so that those in grief feel free to be open. It would especially be hard to lose someone close to you while you’re in college, so I think a support system is very necessary. Another 21 year old female student indicated, “I think that at times being at a Christian university, people think you have to be ‘crazy’ in order to go to counseling. This is not true at all. They help you work through your thoughts and emotions and encourage you to grow in your relationship with the Lord.” Finally, a few participants highlighted the importance of allowing open religious questioning during times of grief. One 21 year old female participant said:

Make them feel normal. At (university), we’re supposed to be happy and have a great relationship with God, and so when something bad happens, we don’t mention it and keep it inside. We’re not allowed to ask hard questions about God and religion. I would try to make bereaved students know that what they’re feeling is normal and provide an outlet besides therapy for them to express the many feelings they’re facing and realize that they’re not alone in it.

The mean time since loss of this group was 9.24 months. Participants reported a mean closeness of 3.69, and 3% ( $n = 1$ ) lost a loved one to murder, 24% ( $n = 7$ ) to accidents, 69% ( $n = 20$ ) to illnesses, and 3% ( $n = 1$ ) to an unknown cause.

**Administration.** Responses within this category involved suggestions for university policy, including absences and make-up work, professor involvement, having mandatory

counseling for bereaved students, and providing funds for travel. One 18 year old female student suggested, “Be understanding, especially with attendance. It’s really hard to make it to class when you are grieving or are in a lot of emotional pain.” Another 19 year old female participant stated:

Make workloads easier. Help the student who is grieving. They don’t want to be so busy with endless schoolwork that they cannot even process what they are going through. Even a year after (person’s) death, I cannot keep up with school and my emotions so most of the time I SUFFER!

Importance of faculty was a recurrent theme throughout responses to this question, with conflicting results. One 21 year old male student said:

Flexible faculty are the key. My professors not only worked with me in order to reschedule my finals, they did so in a way that made me feel supported and empathized with. They offered sincere condolences which made coming back to school much more bearable. Simply, your faculty needs to care about your students.

The mean time since loss was 9.09 months, and the mean closeness was 4.09. Eighteen percent ( $n = 4$ ) of students reported losses due to accidents, 77% ( $n = 17$ ) to illnesses, and 5% ( $n = 1$ ) to an unknown cause.

**Support systems.** Support systems were mentioned numerous times throughout the responses and comprised a strong, recurring theme in the data. These systems were mentioned in terms of friendships and peers, student/floor leadership, professors’ emotional support, spiritual leaders on campus, and prayer groups. A 19 year old male indicated, “... what if they just had a way to hang out with other people more and just be, without trying to solve some big emotional disaster. Most people open up once they become comfortable so maybe we

should just try to be their friend.” Students also suggested more support from student leaders, professors, and other campus leaders. One 20 year old female participant suggested that spiritual leaders:

Be there by checking on (the bereaved) but at the same time do not be a clichéd Christian. All I needed was love, hugs, and an ear to hear... It is good for the school to offer bereavement (services) to the student, (to) just agree with them that life is beautiful still and God has it all under control, regardless of how messy and dark it seems.

The mean time since loss was 11.52 months, and the mean closeness was 3.43. Ten percent ( $n = 2$ ) of these students lost their loved ones to murder, 19% ( $n = 4$ ) to accidents, 67% ( $n = 14$ ) to illnesses, and 5% ( $n = 1$ ) to an unknown cause.

**Education.** Suggestions for education encompassed several avenues, including providing literature on grief/bereavement, offering death and dying courses, and discussing grief in chapel. One 20 year old male student suggested that leaders, “talk about it more in chapel and other avenues that have access to the students. Letting people know about grief and its stages is so important, (as well as) training student leaders to be more effective in grief and trauma (intervention).” The mean time since loss of this group was 18 months, and the mean closeness was 3.25. All 100% ( $n = 4$ ) students lost their loved ones to illnesses.

### **Discussion**

Noppe (2009) discussed the phenomenon of college student bereavement within the framework of Ecological Systems Theory. Data from the current study reflect patterns that effectively illustrate the interpretation of college student bereavement in a Christian university within this perspective as well. Each of the themes potentially influences each systemic level and contributes to students’ personal experiences of college student bereavement.

**Priority of College**

For the most part, students form adaptive patterns that allow cognitive restructuring promoting positive adjustment to loss, even when the loss is traumatic, which we define as murder, suicide, and accident. Those who found more meaning had more time since loss, and these participants experienced some traumatic loss. Those who found less meaning experienced more recent losses and the most traumatic loss. Those who had depressive symptoms in their responses were mostly female, were usually not first year undergraduates, experienced more recent losses (all except 2 were within the last year, averaging 9.35 months), were “very close” to the deceased, and experienced less catastrophic loss than the other two categories. These results suggest that the context of the Christian university culture and overlapping systems may help facilitate positive experiences for many bereft students and negative experiences for some. Results also suggest that close losses are particularly challenging and that first year undergraduates appear to be less vulnerable to depression from grief losses. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of a quick and ongoing university response to students’ losses that occur within very close relationships.

**Experience of College**

The most frequently reported experiential change was in social habits and relationships, a change that may parallel the transitional nature of college but that may exacerbate problems associated with grief (Balk, 2008; Walker, 2009). The most recent losses appeared to characterize changes in motivation and ongoing experiences with grief associated with the loss. A noteworthy finding involves participants changing their views of the university, which became more negative; all reported a closeness of “5” and mean time since loss of nearly a year and a half. Perhaps some experience shattered assumptions so intensely that after a period of

adjustment, value systems have shifted and those mechanisms that drew students to the Christian university have changed. According to Ecological Systems Theory, a change in any part of the system affects all parts; in this case, a small number of students appear to be changing, but rather than allowing this to influence the entire system the students are instead remaining quiet and/or withdrawing.

### **Suggestions for Colleges**

Overall, responses underscored the importance of effective services and supportive university culture. These students wish for peer support and an institutional culture that is open and inclusive, does not shun topics of death and dying as taboo, and is comfortable embracing students who are in pain. Ironically, embedded within the Christian religion are values highly congruent with these students' desires. It is beyond the scope of the current study to explore why this dissonance is perceived, but it appears that more effort should be made to incorporate those values intrinsically into the culture of this Christian university system. Requests for policies of lenience for bereft students are not new (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008), but responses from students in the current study highlight their importance. Suggestions for education were from those more removed from the death, indicating that it may serve as a preventative measure but that in the throes of grief it may seem less useful.

### **Uniqueness of a Christian Context**

Of particular interest to the current study is college student bereavement within a Christian university system. Arnett and Jenson (2002) found that emerging adults were likely to individualize their own religious belief systems in a way that deliberately challenges their childhood socialization processes; this individualization process occurs during the traditional college years. In other words, students who begin college with the religious belief systems of

their childhood may transform their religious perspectives by the time they graduate. In the current sample, 94% reported religious preferences congruent with those inherent in the university's culture. The students also often professed to a strong belief in God and referenced their relationship with him or her in their open-ended responses. Thus, religious preference did not appear to change much during college for these students overall, even for seniors.

Consistent with quantitative data in this study (Walker et al., 2012), however, students who were older and close to the dead person reported difficulty in adjusting to the loss. This suggests an intersection of events, including emerging adulthood, religious individualization, and more abstract thinking, which can lead to greater complexity in dealing with grief. These events may have particular implications in an ecological system that projects a defined religious parameter. It is possible that these participants represent a small portion of college students who do not question religious belief systems, but it is also possible that students in the current study were concerned about social acceptance and chose not to discuss internal questions regarding their own religious belief systems. If the latter is the case, social estrangement experienced by grieving students may lead to more isolation and greater likelihood for prolonged grief than what these students report. Indeed, a few students very directly addressed their desires to construct individualized religious values. For instance, one 21 year old female student said "It's not like I was trying to be bad...I needed a way to cope and I found one. And because it wasn't the Christian way, they push you away..." (For these students, the challenge involved in utilizing surrounding support systems and university services in dealing with grief issues is likely to be the most poignant due to the dissonance resulting from personal value systems (Bernard, Gebauer, & Maio, 2006) that conflict with those of the surrounding exosystem.

In sum, findings suggest both (a) emergence of some general patterns that may help to

further characterize bereavement experience for all college students and (b) some experiences that appear to be unique to Christian university climates. In general, students' religious beliefs may be an important component of dealing with grief (Balk, 1997), and students must be free to explore meaning making processes (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008). In a university with a mission statement specifically articulating Christian values, this process may be covertly usurped. Thus, implications of the current findings are important for counselors and administrators on many campuses, all of which inhabit students whose religious perspectives provide meaning making utility, but they may be particularly important for those on Christian university campuses. The following recommendations reflect our interpretation of the current study's findings and prior research through Ecological Systems Theory (Noppe, 2009). We also draw upon Balk's (1997) suggestion that interventions focus both on (a) general education and methods of helping college students deal with their grief and (b) overall culture and environment.

## **Conclusion**

### **Recommendations for Colleges and Universities**

**Chronosystem.** University administrators are encouraged to take a systematic approach to creating a culture that is not afraid of death. In a Christian university, this may lead to challenge and reflection on core belief systems. Prior research has found death terror and anxiety is higher among religious literalists (Dezutter et al., 2009) and those with extrinsic religious orientation (Hui & Fung, 2009). Christian university administration may thus work to embed an intrinsically religious orientation within Christian school culture.

**Macrosystem.** University administrators, faculty, and staff are encouraged to allow existential questions regarding loss to be safely explored. This will promote a value system

where death, dying, and related grief topics are discussed openly and are not taboo subjects. The students' best interests also need to be promoted, even if changes in priority resulting from the loss direct students away from the university for a period of time. The resulting macrosystem will characterize acceptance and inclusion.

**Exosystem.** Employ bereavement leave and other policies that give allowances for attendance, late and make-up work, etc. Many of the negative responses in the current study appeared to reflect lack of time to deal with the loss. Faculty, staff, and counselors might be trained to maintain an inclusive stance and avoid responses that reflect a particular paradigm, to focus more on students' individual needs. Professors might also be educated in symptoms that can affect students' performances in class. Finally, general education about death, dying, and bereavement should be provided, so that students may be more prepared to deal with aspects of loss when they do occur.

**Mesosystem.** Approach the student. Employ a policy that keeps record of students experiencing death losses and initiates contact that will lead to social support, services, and/or treatment for the student. Develop programs that are directed and facilitated by peers, so student organizations can network and students can provide one another support. This will benefit the bereft, as reported by the current sample, as well as the students who learn to reach out to hurting others, as the current sample indicated that their peers do not always appear to feel comfortable reaching out to them, a finding consistent with prior research (Balk, 1997). Fajgenbaum (2009) developed a national organization called Ailing Mothers and Fathers, one purpose of which is to provide support in the form of peer-led groups for grieving college students. According to this sample, this organization's success is highly likely.

### **Recommendations for Counselors**

**Microsystem.** First, consider that many students attach a stigma to counseling and avoid seeking professional help, particularly at Christian universities, so those who visit the counseling office may be deeply hurting. Second, take time to focus on career counseling and discuss the effects of students' changing priorities away from the university. The priority change away from the university should not be framed negatively, but occupational and social consequences should be reviewed, as well as future goals of returning to college. Next, have deliberate discussions with students about students' religious values and life after death beliefs, as religion can positively influence coping (Balk, 1997; Dezutter et al., 2009; Hossain & Siddique, 2008), though not always (Power & Smith, 2008). Also be aware of a possible discrepancy between personal and institutional values that may result in feelings of estrangement, which are likely to complicate students' grief if avenues of social support are not found. The current sample reported changes in social habits and relationships more frequently than any other type of change; counselors should be prepared to target this.

Counselors are encouraged to avoid simplistic answers to complex questions. Students should guide the incorporation of religiosity into discussions, the level of which is likely to fluctuate throughout the loss experience. Counselors might assess the students' closeness to the decedents, perhaps by asking them to use a scale of 1 to 5 to rate closeness. This will prepare counselors to understand the degree of challenge to the students' self-concept, difficulty in finding meaning, and potential ongoing attachment. In the current study, closeness to deceased was highest (4.0-5.0 range) among those who had the most difficulty adjusting to the loss.

We encourage counselors to be prepared to discuss ongoing attachments to the decedent, within a religious context if appropriate for the student, particularly in the early stages of a very close loss. Without meaning making, however, ongoing attachments can cause more distress

(Neimeyer et al., 2008), so counselors should encourage finding significance in the loss by engaging students in meaning-making activities. For instance, students may write letters to the dead person or to themselves (from the dead person). In especially close losses, students need to be prepared for the ongoing interface with grief that may touch and go throughout their lives. Counselors may ask them to describe the relationship with the person as it would have developed 5, 10, and even 20 years from now to help make sense of the loss. Finally, college students may still be consolidating their self-concepts, and a major loss can impair self-concept development; counselors can thus help the student develop a new life narrative, or perceived position in relation to the rest of the world. This life narrative, either written or verbal, might encompass interactions with university, peer group, current and future jobs, surviving family, and new family (Walker, 2009).

**Individual.** If appropriate, we encourage counselors to explore whether students' religious values are more intrinsic or extrinsic (Hui & Fung 2009); if extrinsic, more counselor assistance may be needed in making sense of the loss. Particular focus should be placed on helping students find meaning when they have experienced catastrophic deaths, as failure to do so can lead to complicated bereavement (Currier et al., 2006), and when they are particularly close to the decedent, as found in the current study. The best combination for avoiding prolonged grief involves high levels of sense making initially followed by low levels of benefit finding (Holland et al., 2006). Share with struggling students that those who grapple the most with existential questions (Neimeyer et al., 2008) and who ruminate at higher levels soon after the event (Proffitt, Cann, Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2007) appear to inhabit the highest potential for post-traumatic growth. If students self-identify with Christian belief system, counselors should point out the characteristic similarity of this finding to that of a Christian paradigm, particularly

in terms of the concept of redemption. Christianity as a religious system can help students navigate meaning making processes if congruent with the student's belief system and should be incorporated into meaning making discussions only this is the case. We also assume that a Christian university environment can provide a context that facilitates the more intrinsic mechanisms of meaning making, but only insofar as institutional and individual values align.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Students reported religious preference and reflected on their own senses of religiosity in their open-ended answers, but an objective measurement of religiosity was not used; similarly, a separate measurement of university culture would have strengthened the study. Also, there may be hesitation from some students to express their values and opinions that diverge from those of the institution, particularly in a study approved by that institution's IRB, so concern for social acceptance may have influenced the answers given by some students. Finally, students may feel that a more positive, optimistic outlook on life better incorporates their own personal Christian principles. This could influence some students to focus on the more positive restoration-oriented aspects and de-emphasize the negative, loss-oriented (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) aspects of their bereavement experience at a Christian university.

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Table 1

*Codebook for Change in Priority, Change in Experience, and Suggestions for Colleges with Frequencies, Time since Loss and Closeness to Deceased*

Code	Frequency ( <i>N</i> )	Mean Time (Months)	Mean Closeness (1=not at all close to 5= very close)
<b>Change in Priority of College</b>			
More Meaning	44	10.61	3.57
Depressive	16	9.35	4.41
Less Meaning	10	8.22	3.8
Total	70		
<b>Change in College Experience</b>			
Habits and Relationships	27	9.5	4.07
Behaviors and Perspectives	16	10.19	4.06
Ongoing Loss Experience	15	8.67	4.53
Motivation	11	8.72	4.09
View of University	4	12.33	5
Religious Views	3	15.33	3.33
Total	76		
<b>Suggestions for Colleges</b>			
Services	50	9.84	3.72
College Culture Change	29	9.24	3.69
Administrative Policies	22	9.09	4.09
Social Support	21	11.52	3.43
Education	4	18	3.25
Total	126		

*Note.* Totals for “Change in Priority of College” and “Change in College Experience” exclude those participants reporting “no change.”