

“I AM MOST DEFINITELY NOT OVER IT”: THE STORIES OF GRIEVING FIRST-YEAR
COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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(Under the Direction of Georgianna Martin)

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of grieving first-year college students. Previous research has suggested that grieving students may make up between 37% and 44% of college students (Cousins et al., 2017). Previous research has also documented that grieving college students may experience higher levels of anxiety, psychosocial distress, and loneliness when compared to non-grieving peers. At the same time, many of these studies have taken a quantitative approach. This study adds to the literature by using a qualitative narrative approach to understand first-year grieving students' experiences. This study honored the unique experiences of nine individuals who experienced grief during their first year in college through narrative inquiry. Participants were recruited nationally through snowball sampling, and data was collected in February and March of 2021. Data was constructed from personal stories of grieving students. These stories are presented as stand-alone findings and interim texts that allowed for the development of themes.

The findings from this study emphasize the uniqueness of grief for everyone. The findings of this study also highlighted the challenges that grieving first-year students may face. Finally, the findings reveal common themes of grief experiences and resiliency. In practice, these

findings support the development of strong social networks for grieving first-year students. For scholarship, this study reframes grieving students away from a deficit and quantitative approach towards an asset-based qualitative approach.

INDEX WORDS: grieving student(s), first-year student(s), student transition(s), narrative inquiry

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DEDICATION

Dad, this one is for you.

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You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble?

-Albus Dumbledore

First, I would like to thank my mom. Raising two teenage boys on your own was not easy. I am so grateful for your constant support throughout my academic career. When I doubted this process and this degree, you always told me not to give up.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Death and grief are concepts that most people will grapple with at some point throughout their lives. Death became a reality for me on July 12th, 2005, when my father died of cancer. As a grieving high school and later college student, studying the experiences of grieving college students is both a personal and professional journey. My experiences taught me that while most people will experience the death of someone close to them, death is also a topic that most people tend to avoid. Similar to the population at large, student affairs literature rarely discusses the topic of grieving college students. While this study did not focus on the 2019 novel coronavirus (Covid-19), the virus has brought grief and death to the forefront of our collective consciousness. While Covid-19 has brought death and grief to the forefront of our minds, grief is still a topic we struggle with discussing.

Research has documented that between 37% and 44% of college students are within two years of losing a loved one (Cousins et al., 2017). Given the prevalence of grieving college students, it is perhaps surprising that only a small amount of research studies these students' experiences. While there is only a handful of literature on grieving college students, several models describing the grief process exist. Kübler-Ross (1969) wrote a five-stage grief model where people move from denial towards acceptance. Bowlby (1981) also wrote a four-stage model where grieving individuals move from shock and numbness towards recovery and acceptance. Stroebe and Schut (1999) offer a dual-process model where individuals oscillate between focusing on their grief and focusing on their recovery. Thai and Moore (2018) outline

two types of grief that our students may experience, acute grief and complicated grief. Acute grief is most common and describes coping with death over a period of time (Thai & Moore, 2018). Complicated grief is an intense longing for the deceased that is difficult to accept with time (Thai & Moore, 2018). The wide variety of literature demonstrates that there is not just one way that grieving students process their grief. Finally, while there is a variety of literature on grief, most researchers agree that grief can be persistent as we progress through our life (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Lamb, 1998; Shear & Mulhare, 2008; Rubin, 1999).

Transition to college is a significant life event for many college students (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Research has documented this transition as a time of heightened anxiety and psychosocial distress (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Several factors help improve first-year college students' experience, including social networks and familial support (Chaffin et al., 2019). However, some of our first-year students no longer have the support from a family member or friend because they are grieving that individual. While many first-year college students experience higher levels of anxiety and psychosocial distress, grieving first-year students may also have to navigate their first year while missing someone from whom they once received support (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Most of the literature on grieving college students has focused on either mental health or academic outcomes. For example, Balk (1996) found that grieving college students had heightened psychosocial distress levels compared to their non-grieving peers. Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) found that grieving students had lower GPAs during their "death loss semester" than their non-grieving peers. Grieving college students also describe feelings of isolation, depression, and decreased belongingness (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Finally, Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) found that in times of transition, such as beginning college and

graduation, grieving college students also experienced times of heightened reflection and grief. Furthermore, thoughts about future major life events brought out grief moments for college students (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

While there is a wide body of literature on processing grief, transition literature, and literature on first-year college students, research has not explored the grieving first-year college students' experience. This research project looked explicitly at their experiences to fill this gap in grieving college student literature. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) discuss how many grieving college students feel alone in their grief. Therefore, this research project gave voice to those college students and demonstrate to future students that they are not alone in their grief. Finally, this research aimed to assist student affairs professionals in understanding students in similar circumstances.

Purpose and Research Question

To date, there is a large body of literature that explores the grief process. Kübler-Ross (1969) is perhaps the most cited with her five stages of grief model. However, other researchers such as Lamb (1988), Rubin (1999), and Shear and Mulhare (2008) have also offered models on how individuals process grief. Furthermore, research has sought to understand how grief impacts college students. Balk (1996; 2008; 2011), Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015), Cupit et al. (2016), Cousins et al. (2017), and Porter and Claridge (2019) discuss college student bereavement. Apart from Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015), the literature above uses quantitative research methodology. However, as Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) note, the stories of grieving college students often go unheard. This is especially true of first-year grieving college students who often feel alone and unseen (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Therefore, the purpose of this research project was to understand the experiences of first-year grieving college students. This study focused on first-year college students who have lost a close friend or family member. To answer my research puzzles, I used narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2013) through photo-elicitation and semi-structured methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Clandinin (2013) states that narrative inquiry does not seek to answer questions but understand participant stories through living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry focuses less on answering a research question but understanding participants' experiences. Therefore, narrative inquiry instead focuses on a research puzzle (Clandinin, 2013).

Consistent with a narrative inquiry, this research project focused on a research topic rather than specific research questions, called a research puzzle (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin (2013) rejects research questions to reframe the research as less focused on finding a definitive concrete answer. A research puzzle allows the research to search for meaning, research, and then search again. Therefore, this study focused on the following research puzzles:

1. Who are grieving first-year college students?
2. How do first-year students experience or re-experience their grief during their first-year transition?
3. What are the strategies that grieving first-year students use during the transition to college?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical lens that guided this research was Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) primarily focuses on life transitions and our ability to move through them. Rubin's (1999) two-track model of grief was also used to understand how

first-year college students are processing their grief. I will describe each of these two models below.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg (1981) presented her transition theory that primarily focused on life transitions. Schlossberg (1981) defined transitions as events or non-events that create a change. In her theory, Schlossberg (1981) outlined four S's that contributed to transitions: the individual's situation, self, support, and strategies. The death of a family member or friend, according to Schlossberg (1981), would be considered an event that created a transition. Schlossberg (1981) would also consider starting their first year of college an event that created a transition. Transition theory is an appropriate theoretical lens because, from grief literature, researchers have documented that transitions are a time of heightened grief (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

In this research, I used Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory in numerous ways. This research used transition theory to guide interview protocol by focusing on students' situations, types of support they received, and strategies that they have utilized to transition to college. Schlossberg (1981) was also used to understand student experiences by acknowledging the four S's in transition theory. Finally, this theory helped recognize the numerous ways first-year college students may navigate their transition.

Bereavement Models

I also used Rubin's (1999) bereavement model as the theoretical lens to understand how first-year students are processing their grief. Rubin's (1999) model consists of two tracks. Track one focuses on how biopsychosocial functioning is impacted by the individual's grief (Rubin, 1999). Examples of how grief can negatively impact individuals in track one includes

depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Rubin, 1999). Track one also describes how grief can negatively impact relationships such as family and friend relationships (Rubin, 1999).

Track two seeks to understand how the deceased's relationship impacts the individual's grief (Rubin, 1999). Some factors that impact grief in track two include closeness to the deceased, a positive or conflictual relationship with the deceased, and meaningful ways that the deceased has been memorialized (Rubin, 1999). The relationship with the deceased can also impact the individuals' self-esteem and meaning-making structure (Rubin, 1999).

Rubin's (1999) two-track bereavement model offers insight into how grief impacts individuals. Unlike other grief models, Rubin (1999) does not provide stages to understand grief because he acknowledges that grief is an on-going process. Rubin et al. (2017) suggest that their two-track model conceptualizes individuals' experiences with grief. The conceptualization of grief focuses on assessing how someone is doing biopsychosocially and the nature of their relationship with the deceased. I used this model in my research to also conceptualize the grief that my participants were experiencing. The two-track model also connects these psychological factors with the nature of the relationship with the deceased. As Rubin et al. (2017), suggest I used the model to determine how the changing nature of the relationship with the deceased throughout their transition to college is linked with any of the physiological factors mentioned.

Using the two-track model, I gained a greater understanding of first-year college students' experiences. This model also helped me make meaning of the multiple experiences, feelings, and emotions that first-year college students may experience during their transition. Finally, I used this understanding to assist in connecting common themes across my participants' various narratives.

Key Terms

Grief: Toth, Stockton, and Brown (2000) define grief as our emotional, psychosocial, and physical response to loss. Furthermore, grief is a multidimensional response to losing someone they love or having an attachment (Toth et al., 2000). There is more than one type of grief that a person can experience.

Acute grief: This type of grief refers to those who successfully cope with their grief over a period of time (Thai & Moore, 2018). Most individuals, when they experience grief experience acute grief (Thai & Moore, 2018).

Complicated grief: Complicated grief occurs between 10% to 20% of all individuals who experience grief (Thai & Moore, 2018). Complicated grief is described as an intense longing or yearning for the deceased, feelings of emptiness, or difficulty accepting the loss (Thai & Moore, 2018).

Disenfranchised grief: Disenfranchised grief brings into grief the role of society and social norms. Because some relationships are deemed illegitimate, improper, marginal, or unimportant, the experiences of loss will not be accepted by society (Balk, 2011). Examples of disenfranchised grief include divorced couples or partners from extramarital affairs (Balk, 2011). Disenfranchised grief plays a role in complicated grief experiences (Thai & Moore, 2018).

Significance of the Study

While the literature suggests that around 37%-44% of college students have reported a significant loss within the last two years, there is limited research on the grieving college student (Cousins et al., 2017). Furthermore, the literature on grieving college students has found that these students feel alone and lacking a voice while at their university (Servaty-Seib &

Fajgenbaum, 2015). Feelings of loneliness were especially true for first-year students transitioning to the university while grieving a loved one (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

This research adds to the limited research on grieving college students. Additionally, this research adds the voices of grieving students to the literature on grieving students. Much of the previous literature has been quantitative studies that focus on mental health and psychosocial outcomes (Balk, 2008; Cupit et al., 2016). In qualitative literature on grieving college students, most participants cite feelings of isolation and the lack of a voice as primary issues that they face regarding their grief.

Grieving college students also report isolation and loneliness (Balk, 2001). This research demonstrated the prevalence and experiences of grieving college students, first, by demonstrating to my participants that they are not alone and have a network of grieving first-year college students across the country. Second, by providing student affairs professionals knowledge of the issues grieving college students face. Student affairs professionals may then implement intervention strategies to support our grieving first-year college students.

Furthermore, grief literature often discussed grieving college students from a deficit approach. This is demonstrated through the literature as describing grieving students as having a lower GPA, higher levels of psychosocial crisis, and greater levels of mental health issues than their non-grieving peers (Cousins et al., Lockman, 2017). This study aimed to understand grieving college students from an asset-based approach. I aimed to describe how grieving first-year college students build social networks, overcome obstacles, and navigate their transition to college. I believe that this research can change the narrative of grieving college students from lacking and towards resilient.

This research also provided insight into how grieving first-year college students navigate their transitional experience. Understanding how first-year students navigate their experiences provides valuable understanding into the college transition experience and the unique challenges of this population. This research used this understanding to provide strategies to create a more welcoming campus climate for all of our students.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies on grieving college students suggest that between 37%-44% of college students have experienced a significant death in their last two years (Cousins et al., 2017). However, due to self-reporting, the exact number of grieving college students is difficult to measure (Cousins et al., 2017). To date, several grief models describe the grieving process. Because researchers agree that everyone grieves differently, there is little consensus in the literature on grief models. Furthermore, there is a body of literature on the first-year college experience. Researchers have documented heightened anxiety, depression, and psychosocial distress among first-year college students (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Fisher & Hood, 1987). The literature on first-year students also discusses how social, familial, and institutional support can impact the first-year student experience (Chaffin et al., 2019; Krumrei et al., 2013). Finally, there is limited literature on grieving college students. The literature that does exist discusses heightened levels of depression and psychosocial distress (Balk, 2001). College student grief literature has also documented that students tend to perform academically worse than their non-grieving peers (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). While there is literature on grief, first-year students, and grieving college students, there is little research on grieving first-year college students.

This study sought to fill the gap in the literature on grieving first-year college students. Prior literature has documented heightened depression, anxiety, and psychosocial distress for both first-year students and grieving college students (Baker & Siryk, 1984) (Fisher & Hood,

1987) (Balk, 2001). However, limited literature has focused on the grieving first-year college student experience. Below I have reviewed the literature on first-year college students, grief and grief models, and grieving college students. Finally, I explore the literature on grief and the college transition to document the need for additional research.

Transition to the University

Schlossberg (1981) is well known for her theory on life transitions; she defined transition as events or non-events that create a change in relationships, routines, or assumptions.

Transitions are situated within their context and are different for everyone. In her theory, Schlossberg (1981) outlined four S's that contributed to transitions: the individual's situation, self, support, and strategies.

In transition theory, the situation refers to what triggers the transition, the transition's timing, previous experience with similar transitions, and concurrent stress (Schlossberg, 1981). The self refers to the personal and demographic characteristics that may impact the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Psychological factors such as self-esteem, the outlook on the situation, and value systems all impact how individuals experience transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Support in transition theory refers to friends, family, and institutional relationships that provide support through aid, affect, and affirmation (Schlossberg, 1981). Finally, strategies refer to the coping mechanism that individuals use to navigate their transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

A prime example of college students' transitions is starting or graduating from college (Arnett, 2004). For many, the transition to college is also a time for heightened reflection (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Fisher and Hood's (1987) conducted groundbreaking research on the first-year college transition. The researchers found that first-year students have an increased level of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, anxiety and depression in the first

year were not contingent upon residential status (Fisher & Hood, 1987). In other words, first-year students as they transition to college have heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and psychosocial distress when compared to upper-class peers.

Bayram and Bilgel(2008) had similar findings to Fisher and Hood(1987). Bayram and Bilgel(2008) found that first and second-year students had higher depression, anxiety, and stress rates than upper-class students. First and second-year students who had higher levels of satisfaction with their education were less likely to have psychosocial distress (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Bayram and Bilgel(2008) also found that female first and second-year students had higher anxiety and depression levels than their male peers.

Ribera et al. (2017) discussed how sense of belonging could impact the first-year transition. First-year students who did not feel like they belonged at the institution would either transfer or drop out of higher education altogether (Ribera et al., 2017). Ribera et al. (2017) found that participating in high-impact practices, such as service-learning, greatly improved students' sense of belonging to an institution. The researchers also found that sense of belonging varied by race. White students believed they belong at an institution at greater rates than Students of Color at the same institution. Ribera et al. (2017) also found that students at private institutions had a greater sense of belonging than their peers that attended public institutions. Developing social networks were important for sense of belonging and positively impacted first-year students (Ribera et al., 2017).

Chaffin et al. (2019) and Yazedjian et al. (2007), like Ribera et al. (2017), researched factors that influenced the first-year transition. Similar to Ribera et al. (2017), the researchers found that one critical factor is the role and prioritization of social factors (Chaffin et al.,2019; Yazedjian et al.,2007). First-year students' main priority is to develop a new support network

(Chaffin et al., 2019). This was especially true for first-year students who did not have anyone from their high school attending their institution (Chaffin et al., 2019). First-year students used their residential community, classes, and extracurriculars to develop social support networks (Chaffin et al., 2019). Having a strong peer network had a strong positive impact on first-year adjustment (Yazedjian et al., 2007).

Familial support also has an impact on first-year college transition (Yazedjian et al., 2007). Financial and emotional support had positive impacts on first-year students (Yazedjian et al., 2007). Specifically, support from parents who went to college has a positive impact on adjustment because they typically understood what the student was going through (Yazedjian et al., 2007). However, first-generation college students reported that parental support had limited impacts on their adjustment since there was a disconnect between experiences (Yazedjian et al., 2007). Because parents of first-generation college students did not experience college, they could not provide as much support in navigating the college experience to their children as parents who had attended a four-year institution. Finally, some parents negatively impacted college adjustment, especially when parents called their students to receive emotional support and not give emotional support (Yazedjian et al., 2007).

Institutional support is important for the first-year transition (Yazedjian et al., 2007). Positive interactions with faculty and staff also facilitated an easier adjustment for first-year college students (Yazedjian et al., 2007). A positive campus-climate also positively influenced first-year college student adjustment (Yazedjian et al., 2007). In this study, the participants' positive campus climate is defined as faculty and staff that cared about them as individuals. Finally, the institution's location influenced college transition (Yazedjian et al., 2007). Institutions that were located around major metro areas positively contributed to first-year

students' sense of belonging and positive campus climate than institutions in more rural areas (Yazedjian et al., 2007). This was particularly true for first-year students that held minoritized backgrounds (Yazedjian et al., 2007).

Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2013) also found six psychosocial factors that influenced first-year student success adjusting to college. These six factors include academic self-efficacy, attention to study, stress and time management, social activities participation, emotional satisfaction with academics, and class communication. Like other research Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2013) emphasized that social support has an important factor in the first-year transition. However, they emphasized participating in activities as the main facilitator of these transitions. Ribera et al. (2017) echo the finding on social support impacting the first-year adjustment. Ribera et al. (2017) found that peer sense of belonging through high impact practices positively influenced college adjustment.

There is a large body of research into the first-year college transition. Researchers have found that first-year students have higher depression rates, anxiety, and psychosocial distress (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Fisher & Hood, 1987). Sense of belonging and developing strong social networks is especially important for first-year students (Chaffin et al., 2019; Ribera et al., 2017; Yazedjian et al., 2007). First-year student literature also emphasizes the importance of academic, social, and family factors (Chaffin et al., 2019; Yazedjian et al., 2007).

Researchers have documented that first-year students have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and psychosocial distress than their upper-class peers (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Furthermore, literature has discussed the impact of family and social networks on first-year college students (Chaffin et al., 2019). However, a topic that is not frequently mentioned in first-

year student literature is grief experiences among this population. The following sections will discuss grief, grief among college students, and grief during times of transition.

Grief

Grief is the multidimensional response that someone might experience as the result of losing someone they love or have developed an attachment to (Toth et al., 2000). Grief can present itself in a wide variety of dependent responses on the individual and the timing of the loss (Toth et al., 2000). Grief is associated with negative impacts on an individual's depression, anxiety, sadness, fear, loneliness, and isolation (Balk, 1996). Grief can also negatively impact individuals' behavior. Some of these negative impacts on behavior include fatigue, agitation, crying, low self-esteem, and job and school performance disturbances (Balk, 1996). Finally, grief can have a negative impact on the physiology of the bereaved through the loss of appetite, low energy, and sleep disturbance (Balk, 1996).

The negative impact of grief varies between individuals. Some of the negative experiences related to grief may be intense or barely noticeable for others (Thai & Moore, 2018). Similarly to grief experiences, the duration of grief also varies between individuals (Thai & Moore, 2018). Factors that impact individuals' experiences with grief include attachment and relationship to the deceased, support, resources, the type of loss, and personality characteristics (Thai & Moore, 2018). Finally, grief research suggests that there is no set end to grief and that grief stays with us (Epstein, 2013). While grief becomes less intense and changes over time, it never truly goes away (Epstein, 2013).

Although grief impacts everyone differently, researchers have determined that people can experience two types of grief. The two types of grief outlined by researchers are uncomplicated acute grief and complicated grief (Thai & Moore, 2018). The type of grief that individuals

experience impacts how they cope and process grief (Thai & Moore, 2018). While there is no such thing as “normal” grief, most people who experience grief will experience uncomplicated acute grief (Lobb et al., 2010). Uncomplicated grief refers to grief experiences that are successfully coped over a period (Lobb et al., 2010). Finally, unlike in complicated grief, a person experiencing uncomplicated grief maintains self-efficacy, feels emotionally connected to others, and believes their life still holds meaning (Lobb et al., 2010). Most of the grief models outlined in the next section focus on coping with uncomplicated grief.

However, complicated grief is a prolonged grief disorder characterized by longing or yearning for the deceased, feelings of hopelessness, and intense emotions of anger and bitterness, among other physiological disturbances (Balk et al., 2011). Some factors that contribute to experiencing complicated grief include a history of prior loss, psychological disorders, being dependent on the deceased, or experiencing a traumatic death (Balk et al., 2011). Some examples of a traumatic death that college students may have experienced include school shootings or suicides (Balk et al., 2011). Researchers also suggest that women, people from lower social classes, and lost children are more likely to experience complicated grief (Balk et al., 2011; Thai & Moore, 2018).

A contributing factor to complicated grief is a concept called disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2008). Disenfranchised grief refers to a situation where a person experiences a significant loss but cannot fully express that grief because the relationship is not socially or culturally acceptable (Doka, 2008). Because of the nature of the relationship and the grief, many people who experience disenfranchised grief also experience a lack of support (Doka, 2008). Examples of disenfranchised grief vary by social and cultural norms but could include the death of an ex-spouse, an incarcerated loved one, someone who dies from an overdose, or someone who dies

from suicide (Doka, 2008). People experiencing complicated grief report a lack of support and acknowledgment that they are grieving (Doka, 2008). They also report not being given the right to grieve and not receive any sympathy from their peers (Doka, 2008). Researchers have found that complicated grief is more common among young adults, especially when there is a high level of closeness in the relationship (Balk et al., 2011). Finally, complicated grief may disrupt young adults' psychosocial and cognitive development (Balk et al., 2011). Particularly complicated grief may disrupt the world view of still-developing young adults (Balk et al., 2011).

Grief Models

Grief is a widely studied topic. Grief is unique to the individual experiencing it. Most individuals experience acute uncomplicated grief, while a select number of others experience complicated grief. Because grief is such a widely studied topic, several models help explain how people can process grief. One of the most commonly known models on the grieving process is Kübler-Ross' (1969) Stages of Grief model. Kübler-Ross outlined the five stages of grief as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In the denial and anger stages, individuals deny their diagnosis or situation, but when they can no longer deny what is happening to them, they move towards anger (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The model then describes a time of bargaining where those who are dying attempt to negotiate themselves out of the situation (Kübler-Ross, 1969). When bargaining does not work, participants move into a depression stage (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Finally, participants accept what is happening to them and embrace their mortality (Kübler-Ross, 1969). While this stage model of grief is perhaps the most well-known, it is often the most misunderstood. Many non-grief scholars believe that this stage

model refers to the grieving process after someone has died; however, Kübler-Ross outlines are the process to accept that you or a loved one is dying (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

The Kübler-Ross (1969) model is unique because of the five stages of grief model to assist in our understanding of accepting our mortality. A critique of the Kübler-Ross(1969) model is that people tend to use the model to describe how people grieve for losing a loved one. While Kübler-Ross (1969) does discuss grief, it is important to remember the model only addresses how you accept your death and not the death of others. Grief researchers have developed various models that explain how individuals grieve for the loss of a loved one. Some researchers, such as Bowlby (1982), Lamb (1998), and Worden (2009), developed stage models to explain grief. Rubin (1999) and Stroebe and Schut(1999) take a different approach and offer dual tracks or process models to understand grief. Rubin (1999) and Stroebe and Schut(1999) stand out because they emphasize the interaction of physical manifestations of grief, personal relationships, and the external environment.

Apart from Kübler-Ross (1969), Bowlby (1982) developed an early grief model that consists of four phases. Shock and numbness are phase one and refers to the initial reaction and the inability to accept the loss as reality. Yearning and searching are considered phase two. In this phase, a person experiences a wide variety of emotions; they begin to yearn for their loved one and search for meaning in their death. Phase three is coined disorganization and despair, where the person withdraws from activities and begins to accept the loss. Finally, phase four is reorganization and recovery, where the person begins to understand their old life has changed and begins to accept their new normal.

Lamb (1998) also developed a stage model that articulated grief as three stages. Lamb (1998) described the initial phase of grieving as acute reactions, such as numbness, shock, denial,

or protesting. These acute reactions serve to either allow the individual to sustain the loss's impact without being overwhelmed or postpone the grieving process until griever have developed coping mechanisms (Lamb, 1998). The intermediate stage is an active emotional experience of grief. Some emotions that may be felt in this stage include distress, disorganization, despair, and yearning for the deceased (Lamb, 1998). The final stage is when the griever begins to move on with the continuation of former activities or begin new ones (Lamb, 1998). Lamb (1998) is similar to Bowlby (1982). However, in Lamb's (1998) stage model, acceptance of the loss and experiences of intense emotions are not conflated in the same stage as in the Bowlby (1981) model.

Finally, Worden (2009) developed a four-stage task model that focuses on the completion of mourning. Like in Kübler- Ross (1969) and Lamb (1988), grievers move from one task to the next. However, Worden (2009) acknowledges that grief is not a linear process and that each task may need to be revisited over time. Task one is accepting the reality of loss. The first task can be simple, such as attending the funeral or memorial, or it can be complex, such as accepting the loss's correlating impact. The second task is working through the pain of grief and, for Worden's (2009) model, working through a range of emotions felt by the individual. What is important in this task is to acknowledge and understand these emotions and not to avoid them. Task three is defined as adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing. This task is again individualized and may require internal, external, and spiritual adjustments (Worden, 2009). Finally, task four calls to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life (Worden, 2009). This task focuses on finding an appropriate ongoing connection to the person who died while also continuing to live.

Rubin (1999) and Stroebe and Schut(1999) take a different approach than the stage models proposed by Kübler- Ross (1969), Bowlby (1982), Lamb (1988), and Worden(2009). In these models' grievors moved from one stage to the next. However, Rubin (1999) proposed a two-track model with each track operating simultaneously. Track One focuses on the basic functioning of the griever (Rubin, 1999). Track One focuses on anxiety, depressive affect, familial relationships, self-esteem/ self-worth, work, and investment in life tasks (Rubin, 1999). Track One focuses on how grief impacts each of these areas and the time it takes to return to a new normal (Rubin, 1999). Track Two focuses on the bereaved's relationship to the deceased. Track Two's prominent components are positive or negative affect towards the deceased, grievors preoccupation with the loss, or their idealization of the person they lost (Rubin, 1999).

Like Rubin (1999), Stroebe and Schut(1999) offer a dual-process model of grief. This model's key concept is oscillation, where the person will move between loss-orientation and restoration coping. Oscillation occurs because of life experiences that shift the focus between them (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Loss-orientated coping includes grief work, an intrusion of grief, letting go, and denying restoration changes (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Whereas restoration focused coping includes attending to life changes, doing new things, denial/avoidance of grief, and new roles, identities, and relationships (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In the dual-process model, people oscillate between each process as they confront daily life stressors (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Finally, Shear and Mulhare (2008) break from the other grief models and conceptualize the grieving process in two phases. Stage one is the acute phase is the immediate aftermath of a loss often accompanied by anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. Stage two is the integrated phase, where the bereaved begins to incorporate the loss into everyday life. Shear and Mulhare

(2008) do not explicitly state when and how individuals move from stage one into stage two. Furthermore, they also state that grief is not linear and experience grief, anxiety, and depression at any time.

While Kubler- Ross (1969), Bowlby (1981), Lamb (1988), Rubin (1999), Stroebe and Schut(1999), and Shear and Mulhare (2008) all offer either a track or phase model, all of the researchers reject the concept that grief is a linear process. In each of the models presented, bereaved individuals may progress and regress throughout time (Lamb, 1998; Rubin, 1999; Shear & Mulhare, 2008). Finally, in each of the models, there is an acknowledgment that grief is a non-linear process. Therefore, it is important to remain flexible when discussing the grief process and grief models.

Grief Among College Students

As documented in the literature above, the first-year transition demonstrates the elevated needs of first-year students and some positive and negative factors that contribute towards their transition. According to Schlossberg (1981), the transition to college would be considered an anticipated life event. However, some of our college students are also transitioning to college while grieving a loved one's loss. According to Schlossberg (1981), a loved one's death would be considered an unanticipated transition.

While the literature on grief among college students' is sparse, a few researchers have begun to document their experiences. Balk (1996,2001) has historically been considered foundational research in the study of bereaved college students. Balk (1996) found that the greater the attachment to the deceased, the grieving student experiences greater psychosocial distress. Balk (2001) suggested that college students are unlikely to view grief as a mental health

issue and seek counseling. Balk (2001) also documented that grieving college students found the university setting isolated while grieving.

While Balk (1996, 2001) discussed grieving college students over 20 years ago, recent literature has begun to explore current grieving students' experiences. With this new literature, much of what Balk (1996, 2001) discussed still is relevant today. Cupit et al. (2016), similarly to Balk (1996), found that the deceased's closeness was linked to issues navigating the college experiences. Cupit et al. (2016) discussed how higher levels of closeness to the deceased were related to greater disengagement to the college community and hindered academic success. Cupit et al. (2016) also found that death experiences negatively impact college student's mental health functioning. Some of the negative impacts that Cupit et al. (2016) found include isolation, withdrawal, and lack of interest. Lack of peer support also negatively impacted college students (Cupit et al., 2016). When college students had a peer support group, they felt more connected to a community and less isolated than bereaving college students who did not have a peer support group (Cupit et al., 2016).

Grief interacts with college students in holistic ways, including physical, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development (Balk et al., 2011). For example, grieving students have more difficulty concentrating than their non-grieving peers (Cupit et al., 2016). Additionally, Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) found that grieving students have lower GPAs during their "death loss semester" than non-grieving peers. Grieving students also describe isolation, lack of support, and decreased belongingness (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Finally, grieving college students are at a higher risk of leaving college than their non-grieving peers (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Gender and race also played an important role in bereaved college students. Cousins, Servaty-Seib, and Lockman (2017) found that grieving college women had less social and emotional adjustment than their non-bereaving peers. Furthermore, grieving male college students demonstrated lower institutional attachment than their non-bereaved peers (Cousins et al., 2017). Being a grieving student from a racial minority group also resulted in lower social and emotional adjustment and less institutional attachment than their non-bereaved peers (Cousins et al., 2017).

Noting that Balk et al. (2011) found that grief among college students impacted spirituality, Hang-Hai et al. (2018) looked at the impact of college students' religiosity on bereavement. Hang-Hai et al. (2018) found that Christian students could identify positive coping strategies at higher rates than their non-religious peers. However, the researchers also found that Christian students implemented maladaptive bereavement coping mechanisms at higher rates than their non-religious peers. Hang-Hai et al. (2018), similarly, to Balk et al. (2011), also found that grief during the transition to adulthood impacted religiosity. Depending on the type of loss and the context, grief could positively reinforce their religious beliefs or negatively impact these beliefs.

Research has demonstrated that grief reactions among young adults are different from those of older adults (Palmer et al., 2016). For example, there is a negative impact on developing interpersonal relationships for young adults who experience grief. Also, grief has a negative impact on the experiences of young adult milestones, such as high school graduation and going to college. While these milestones may be a cause of celebration for others, it creates sadness for grieving young adults because the loved one is missing the milestone. Finally, Palmer et al. (2016) found that while first-year college students already had transitional issues, grieving

college students had heightened depression and anxiety levels because of the missing support system.

Grief and Transition to College

While there is a wide variety of literature on the transition to college and an even greater mass of literature on grieving, there is little literature on grieving first-year students' experiences. However, the literature has also demonstrated that a significant portion of our students has experienced a loss of a loved one within the last two years (Cousins et al., 2017)

Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) write that beginning college was a time of heightened reflection for their participants. The participants in their narrative inquiry discussed the difficulties of transitioning to college. The participants discussed the exciting possibility of “starting over” or having no one know their story (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). However, they soon found that they missed having others know their story or know their lost loved ones (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Finally, many of these participants spoke of being alone at college and lacking the grief support system they had before college (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Palmer et al. (2016) also found that grief was heightened during the first-year transition. Palmer et al. (2016) also found that having a peer outlet and support group positively influenced young adults. These findings are also found in student affairs literature on grieving and non-grieving first-year college students. The literature also has documented several ways that colleges can intervene to assist grieving college students. Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum (2015) discussed the importance of grieving college students to have a peer support group. Cousins et al. (2017) looked at factors that positively impact college student adjustment. They specifically looked at the differences between grieving and non-grieving college students. While

Servaty- Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) found that college students particularly need social support, Cousins et al. (2017) found the opposite to be true. While Cousins et al. (2017), like Ribera (2017), Chaffin (2019), and Yazedjian (2017), found that family and social support lead to a positive adjustment to college, they also found that for bereaved students, only family supports had a positive impact on college adjustment. Cousins et al. (2017) also emphasized that the lack of family support for bereaved college students had a stronger negative impact on college adjustment than lack of family support in their non-bereaved peers. Finally, women and students with racially minoritized identities also had a more difficult time adjusting than their White male peers who were also grieving.

Finally, researchers have noted that grief can impact individuals during times of psychosocial development (Cupit et al., 2016). Experiencing death during a critical life transition may lead to maladaptive development (Cupit et al., 2016). This is particularly true when there are few resources to assist with positive coping of grief (Cupit et al., 2016). Coping with grief among first-year college students may also be particularly challenging because they are away from already established social support networks (Cousins et al., 2017). Research into bereaved college student development also suggests that women may experience more difficulties with transitions and identity development than men (Cousins et al., 2017). According to the research done on the topic, this tends to be because women tend to focus more on connectedness and compassion than individualization that exemplifies development in college (Cousins et al., 2017). Women also tend to maintain an emotional connection with the deceased, leading to greater attachment than men (Cousins et al., 2017).

Chapter Summary

The literature substantially documents the concept of grief. Grief refers to the emotional and physical responses to the loss of a loved one. Types of grief include acute uncomplicated grief and complicated grief. Disenfranchised grief, experienced more frequently by young adults, is a significant factor in complicated grief (Thai & Moore, 2018). How individuals experience grief is unique to the individual and can vary throughout time (Thai & Moore, 2018).

However, to help explain how people experience grief, researchers have developed several grief models. Kübler-Ross's (1969) model has historically been considered the starting point for the modern discussion on grief. However, Bowlby (1982), Lamb(1988), Rubin(1999), Stroebe and Schutt(1999), Worden(2009), and Shear and Mulhare(2008) demonstrate that the work on understanding how we process grief is a continuing process. However, during this research, I aim to use Rubin's (1999) Two-Track Model to understand how my students were processing their grief.

Furthermore, researchers have documented transitions and the first-year college experience in the literature. Schlossberg began the work on transitions with her model (1981). From this work, a wide variety of research has been done to understand the first-year transition experiences. Research has found first-year students experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and psychosocial distress (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008) (Fisher & Hood, 1987). Peer, familial, and institutional support facilitate better college adjustments among first-year students (Chaffin et al., 2019; Yazedjian et al., 2007).

Researchers have also investigated grieving college students (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Most of this literature takes a quantitative approach to grieving college students. The literature has documented that grieving students are more likely to drop-out or

experience a drop in grade-point average than their non-grieving peers (Cousins et al., Lockman, 2017). Literature also documented higher levels of depression and anxiety among grieving college students than their non-grieving peers (Balk,2008). The qualitative studies on grieving college students also document feelings of loneliness and isolation among grieving college students (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Finally, some of the research has mentioned first-year grieving college students. Palmer et al. stated that the first-year transition heightened experiences of grief. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) also found that first-year students felt more isolated than their non-grieving peers. The gap in first-year grieving students is where my research will take place. This research will serve to document first-year grieving students' experiences and add to the existing literature on grieving college students in general.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology and methods that I used to execute this study. Throughout the chapter, I will explain my theoretical paradigm, methodological approach, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures, and the measures I took to ensure trustworthiness.

Theoretical Paradigm

I approached this research through the constructivist paradigm using narrative inquiry. The constructivist paradigm operates under the assumption that multiple worldviews can exist simultaneously and are equally valid (Mertens, 2010). By using the constructivist paradigm, I acknowledged that my participants operated within their unique truth. Furthermore, the constructivist paradigm asserts that knowledge is socially constructed through lived experiences (Mertens, 2010). Therefore, my job as the researcher was to work with participants to co-construct knowledge to reveal my participants' lived experiences. To understand my participants' experiences, I employed qualitative methods through narrative inquiry. These methods allowed my participants and I to generate knowledge through a detailed description of their experiences.

The constructivist paradigm was appropriate for this study because it acknowledges diverse perspectives and their validity. Multiple grief models acknowledge that the experiences of grief are unique to each person (Lamb, 1988; Rubin, 1999; Shear & Mulhare, 2008 Stroebe & Schut, 1999). While grieving individuals may go through similar processes, their experience is unique to them. Both grief models and constructivist paradigms acknowledge the uniqueness of

the individual experience. Using the constructivist paradigm, I aimed to honor the multiple stories of my participants as they work through grief and transition to the university as valid and important (Mertens, 2010).

Qualitative Methods

This research study used qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research constructs the reality of participants through their stories and lived experiences (Prasad, 2018). In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument. Furthermore, qualitative research that is informed through a constructivist paradigm acknowledges the existence of the multiple realities of both participant and researcher (Prasad, 2018). Because of multiple realities and constructions of knowledge, the researcher and the participant co-construct knowledge to understand their experiences. Through the co-construction of knowledge, the participants had a larger voice in the research than in other research types.

In this study, I aimed to understand grieving first-year college students' experiences as they transitioned into their college environment. In this research, I sought to understand how they navigated their transitional experiences and how their university has helped or hindered their transition. Qualitative research, particularly narrative inquiry, was appropriate to understand the grieving first-year student experience. Prior research has also demonstrated the importance of this population to speak and be heard about their experiences. Therefore, a qualitative narrative inquiry was critical to understand the experiences of grieving first-year college students.

Narrative Inquiry

The present study employed narrative inquiry. In narrative research, a research puzzle is generally developed, rather than definitive research questions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Research questions create the expectation there is a definitive answer, whereas narrative research

focuses on the experiences and the re-experiences of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study attempted to answer the following research puzzles: Who are grieving first-year college students? how did grieving first-year students navigate college transition? What are some strategies that grieving first-year students use to transition to college?

The purpose of narrative inquiry was to understand participants' holistic experiences (Clandinin, 2007). Narrative inquiry accomplishes this goal through the form of storytelling (Clandinin, 2007). However, narrative inquiry is not just storytelling alone. Narrative inquiry also situates these stories within the social and cultural context of the story. Finally, narrative research generally creates and builds themes across the participants' narratives and the researcher's narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

According to Clandinin (2016), narrative inquiry typically begins with either the living of stories or stories' retelling. Researchers who want to engage in narrative inquiry with the living of the stories enter the narrative "in the midst" of a participant's life. To do this, the researcher must gather data on what it is like to be a participant in several ways. One method is to gather photos and descriptions to understand what it is like to live that participants' life. This narrative inquiry entered the story amid the narrative through photovoice methods. I will explain photovoice methods in a later section.

Narrative inquiry gives voice to the experiences of the participants in the research study. Servaty-Seib and Fejgenbaum (2015) found that many college students believed that they were alone in their social circles in experiencing grief. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) also found that grieving college students felt that they lacked a voice or a method of expression of their grief. The findings in Servaty-Seib indicate why narrative inquiry is an appropriate methodology for studying grieving students' experiences as they transitioned to college.

Data Collection and Analysis

Research Site

This study was open to all participants who currently attend a college or university in the United States. Opening the research to college students across the country allowed me to obtain a larger sample size and data saturation. Below are the pseudonyms and characteristics of the institutions my participants attended.

Southeast Research University: A large research university located in the Southeast United States. This institution had approximately 40,000 students with around 6,000 first-year students.

University of the Southeast: A large research university located in the Southeast. There were about 56,000 students that attend University of the Southeast. Roughly 6,500 of these students were first-year students.

Southeast Private College: Southeast Private College was significantly smaller than Southeast Research University and University of the Southeast. There were about 10,000 students total at Southeast Private College, of which 3,400 are undergraduate students.

Southeast State College: This institution was a medium to large sized public comprehensive university in the Southeast. There were about 22,000 students that attend Southeast State college. There were about 2,000 first-year students each year at Southeast State College.

MidAtlantic State College: This institution was a medium to large sized comprehensive university located in the MidAtlantic. There were about 20,000 students that attend MidAtlantic with about 2,700 first-year students.

Northeast Liberal Arts College: This institution was a small private college located in the Northeast. There were about 4,000 students at Northeast Liberal Arts College and about 500 first-year students.

Recruitment and Selection

Participants in this study were primarily recruited through snowball sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Snowball sampling allowed participants to recommend others to participate in the research (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Furthermore, snowball sampling allowed the research to utilize professional connections to recruit participants. Participants were communicated through email and provided the recruitment email in Appendix A. Participants' sampling criteria was self-disclosed grieving college students who lost an immediate family member, close friend, or partner before coming to college. While I originally, I aimed to interview first-year students who lost a loved one within two years due to issues in recruitment I opened the study to any college student who lost a loved one before or during their first year. Interviewing participants who were not in their first year allowed for more time for participants to reflect on their experience and enriched the data.

Data Collection

Data was collected via an interview and photovoice. I conducted one 60-90-minute semi-structured interview. To thank them for their participation, participants received a \$20 Amazon gift card. The interview protocol is in Appendix B. Prior to beginning the interview, I explained the consent process. The consent form is in Appendix C. I first used photo-elicitation to create rapport and create the context for my participants' stories (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). I began my interview by having my participants describe their photos and why they chose this photo. Photo-elicitation also allowed me to situate the participant's story within its contexts and amongst the broader life story (Clandinin, 2013). Through photo-elicitation, I was also brought alongside the participant story, which is key in narrative inquiry research (Clandinin, 2013).

Additionally, photo-elicitation allowed participants to express themselves through a method that is outside the interview questions. The photo also allowed participants to place importance on the family member they are grieving and how this loss has impacted their life. Participant's description of the photo was analyzed and used for theme development. (Clandinin, 2013).

The rest of the interview was consistent with a narrative inquiry. Each interview question was open-ended to allow participants to construct their narrative (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). I recorded each interview to gather quality data and provide for reflection. After discussing their chosen photo, I focused primarily on the participants' experience with college transition while grieving a loved one. The interview also focused on strategies that grieving first-year students employed to navigate their transitional experience. After I completed the interviews, I transcribed them via an electronic transcribing resource. Finally, the interview participants had an opportunity to member-check the transcripts and the themes (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Of my nine participants only three responded and agreed with the themes.

Data Analysis

The stories of grieving students can be complex. Therefore, the data analysis of a narrative inquiry related to grieving first-year students' lived experiences was also complex. Just collecting stories alone was not the goal of this research but also to compare those stories, place them in their context, and provide insight into what we can learn from these stories. Clandinin (2013) suggests moving from field texts to interim texts, and then final research texts. Each of these reconstructions allows both researcher and participants to construct and co-construct the meaning from their stories (Clandinin, 2013).

To begin the data analysis process, I began with the field texts. Field texts include interview transcripts and the photo-elicitation. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed

using an online transcribing service. I began to analyze these interviews by listening to the recording, reading the transcript, and deeply reflecting on what my participants described in their interviews. Through the interview process, the review of interviews, and reflection, I attempted to situate myself in my participants' stories (Clandinin, 2013).

After initial transcription and review, I re-constructed the individual stories of my participants. I then compared these stories and looked for common themes or common quotes (Patton, 2015). As I reread the transcripts, I began to assign codes to phrases, powerful quotations, or expressions of emotions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The codes that I assigned then became the overall themes that emerged from the data. Finally, I reviewed the codes that I developed to collectively understand my student's experiences (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). To honor narrative inquiry, I interwove the lives of my participants into my own narrative and then a finally overarching narrative of my participants (Clandinin, 2013).

Finally, I worked with participants to member-check their stories and the common themes developed to add trustworthiness to the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Member-checking took place after themes were developed. Participants had the opportunity to provide written feedback via email to the themes and to their personal stories. Only three participants responded and affirmed their stories and the themes. Finally, two peer reviewers reviewed the transcripts, codebook, and themes. The peer reviewers affirmed the themes as well.

Positionality Statement

Positionality statements are important in qualitative narrative research in understanding how the researcher interprets the collected data. I identify as white, gay, cis-gender male. For this study, I believe it is important to note that I do not have strong religious or spiritual beliefs, although I was raised Roman Catholic. Finally, my father died on July 12, 2005, when I was

fifteen years old. As a first-year college student, I still considered myself a grieving student. For this research, I believe it is important to understand how I made meaning during my first year is important to understand my biases and how I may interpret other stories.

When I first moved into college, I believed that I had moved past my father's death. However, seeing most of my peers being moved in by their mother and father made me recognize that I was still very much grieving. I remember feeling like I was missing something that weekend. Those feelings persisted and influenced a large portion of my first year. Discussions on family became awkward quickly during my first year and even more uncomfortable when I mentioned my dad died three years prior. Throughout my first year, I felt grief that I thought I had long moved past. However, there seemed to be something new in that first-year that reminded me of losing a prominent family member at every turn. In reflection, I think it would have been helpful to have found a community of other grieving students to connect with, but there were intense feelings of loneliness without that support.

Since first transitioning to college, I have gone through so many other life transitions. Graduating with my bachelors and master's degrees, entering the full-time workforce, and beginning a Ph.D. program have been the most pronounced. Each time I transition, that change brings with it some level of grief for my dad. As I think about graduating with a Ph.D. in the future, I also think that my dad really should be in the audience. Even though he will not be there to celebrate, I know that he would be proud of me. Being in this Ph.D. program has made me reflect on almost every aspect of my undergraduate and professional experiences. Sometimes I think about the saying, "be the person you needed when you were younger." Well, I hope that with this research project, I can accomplish just that and tell my younger self and all other college students that we are not alone.

As a researcher, I believe it is important to understand my experiences related to the research topic. I am predisposed to believe that grief is an important aspect of the first-year transition from my narrative. While I must continually reflect on my experiences in a narrative inquiry, I must also remember that my participants' experiences are not my own. With this, I must be vigilant to honor my participants' experiences as their own stories truly.

Trustworthiness

There are several measures that qualitative researchers can take to ensure quality within their research. For this study, I incorporated member-checking by allowing my participants to provide feedback on the transcripts and the themes that I developed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Next, I incorporated information triangulation through interviews and photo-elicitation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I also kept a research audit and research notes so that other researchers will be able to follow my path and understand how I reached my conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, I provided my themes and codebook to two peer reviewers. The peer reviewers were able to follow my thought process and code notes. Both peer reviewers affirmed my codes and themes.

Finally, I kept a researcher journal. By keeping a research journal, I tracked my thought process throughout the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research journal also allowed me to reflect on the experiences and the stories of my participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Keeping a research journal added to trustworthiness by allowing other researchers to track my thought processes and reflections throughout the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Limitations

The goal of narrative inquiry is to represent and honor the stories of participants. Narrative inquiry also seeks to relate those stories to others. Since the primary method was storytelling, the true meaning and experiences of participants may not accurately be represented to their fullest extent in this research. Furthermore, this research study only represented the stories of those who participated in the study. Therefore, this research does not provide an overall experience of all grieving first-year college students.

First-year grieving college students were also difficult population to recruit and interview. Grief is a highly personal and emotional experience, and first-year students may not have felt comfortable discussing their experiences with a researcher. Hesitation speaking with a researcher may also be augmented because interviews will be conducted virtually. Finally, I believe that COVID-19 had an impact on participant recruitment. Many colleagues and professional networks said they did not know many first-year students this year because of classes being primarily virtual.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the constructivist paradigm, qualitative research methodology, narrative inquiry, and specific methods that used to collect data. I used the information I discussed in this chapter to approach my three research puzzles: Who are grieving first-year college students? How did grieving first-year students navigate college transition? And what are some strategies that grieving first-year students use to transition to college?

I used narrative inquiry to understand my participants in relation to my research puzzles. Through narrative inquiry, I used photo-elicitation and unstructured interview protocol to gather

data. Finally, I used narrative inquiry to honor my participants' stories and develop common themes across the data.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand the experiences of grieving first-year college students. To understand these experiences, I had three broad research puzzles (1) who are grieving first-year college students, (2) how do first-year students experience or re-experience their grief during their first-year transition, and (3) what are the strategies that grieving first-year students use to transition to college? In this chapter, I present the findings of this study.

Summary of Methods

To respect and honor grieving first-year college students' stories, I designed this narrative inquiry using transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and bereavement models (Rubin, 1999). I recruited participants by emailing regional boards of ACUHO-I to email the call for participants to their listservs. The nine participants were recruited through snowball sampling and professional networks. Each interview took place over Zoom and lasted for approximately 60 minutes.

Over four weeks in February and March 2021, I interviewed nine participants. Each participant was asked to bring a photo that reminded them of their loved one. Every participant except for Lucy chose to share a photo of them with their loved one. Lucy chose a photo from her high school graduation, her first photo without her father. Each image's presentation allowed me to enter each participant's story before coming to college or their loved ones passing (Clandinin, 2013). I conducted each interview in a semi-structured format. While I had a set of

questions, the semi-structured format allowed me to ask follow-up and specific questions related to the participants' unique experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Of my participants, I interviewed eight women and one man. I was not aiming to interview primarily women; however, I suspect this may have been because women may be more likely to discuss grief than their male counterparts (Thai & Moore, 2018). Seven of my participants identified as White and two participants identified as Black. Table 1 presents the demographics for the participants that I interviewed. Six participants attended institutions in the Southeast, one participant attended an institution in the Northeast, and one attended an institution in the MidAtlantic. Five participants lost their loved one before their first year, three participants lost their loved ones during their first semester, and one participant lost their loved one in their second semester.

Table 1: Participant Description

Name (Pseudonym)	Deceased's relationship to participant	Time of passing prior to first year	Institution (Pseudonym)
Lucy	Father	6 months prior to first year	Southeast Research University
Alexis	Mother	1 year prior to first year	Southeast Research University
Quinn	Friend	December of first year	Southeast Research University
Lisa	Father	15 years prior to first year	Southeast Research University

Elizabeth	Brother	7 years prior to first year	Northeast Liberal Arts College
Elise	Friend/ ex-boyfriend	October of first year	MidAtlantic State College
Ashley	Grandfather	First weekend of first year	Southeast State College
Denise	Roommate	First day of second semester	Southeast Private College
Jason	Father	During first year orientation	University of Southeast

Presentation of Findings

At the onset of this study, I knew that grief was unique to the individual. Across the nine interviews that I conducted; this could not have been more evident. To honor the individuals' stories and their loved ones' memory, I decided to construct each participant's individual story. Each participant had a unique experience, and the stories presented in this chapter aim to honor those experiences. Despite their differences, each participant had a shared experience, losing their loved one too soon. I constructed the following stories through careful review of the transcripts.

Furthermore, each participant was given their story to review and edit through member-checking. The themes were also peer-reviewed. Peer reviewers were provided with coded transcripts and the codebook. The peer reviewers reviewed that transcripts and codes and provided feedback on the themes. Throughout the stories, I tried to use direct quotes whenever

possible to center each participant's voice. Because grief is not linear the participants spoke about events during their transition outside of chronological order. For clarity, I constructed the participant stories to match a chronology of their first year.

After I conclude the individual participant story, I provide the themes I identified from the data across all interviews. My goal is not to suggest that each participant had the same experience. However, I aim to show that while grief is unique to everyone, there may be some common experiences among grieving first-year college students.

Participant Stories

Lucy's Story

Lucy was originally from a major Northeast City but decided to attend Southeast Research University after visiting with her father during her senior year of high school. Lucy lost her father about six months before starting at Southeast Research University. Lucy was majoring in psychology and anthropology, and her goal was to get a master's in non-profit management when she graduated. Here is Lucy's story:

Lucy described herself as an outgoing and goal-driven person. She likes to set high goals and accomplish them, which she has done throughout numerous leadership positions in her sorority. She also stated that she has thick skin. She chose to come to Southeast Research University because she wanted to get out of Northeast City and experience something new. An acquaintance from high school told her that if she wanted to get out of Northeast City, Southeast Research University was the place to attend. Shortly before her dad's passing, she had gone on a Southeast road trip to look at various colleges and universities throughout the region.

After Lucy returned from her college tour in the Southeast, her dad passed away unexpectedly, only a few short months from her graduation. Determined to continue her studies

to get into Southeast Research University, Lucy attended classes on Monday after her father passed away.

Uniquely, Lucy chose to describe a photo that was taken during her high school graduation after her father's passing. In the photo are her two sisters, her mom, maternal grandmother, paternal grandfather, two brothers, and various nieces and nephews. She chose this photo because it demonstrates how her family came together and bounced back after her father's untimely passing.

A few months after her father's passing, Lucy moved into Southeast Research University. Within a few weeks, she discovered that her random roommate had also lost her father at a young age. Throughout the interview, Lucy stated that her roommate was a constant source of support during her transition to school. One of the first hard days for Lucy fell on 9/11, a day she connected with her father, who had worked in the South Tower before the terrorist attack. Her strongest memories of her dad come from watching documentaries and remembering everyone they lost on that day. This was a hard day for Lucy because it reminded her of every year prior with her dad.

Lucy also thought of her father various times throughout her first semester. One of the times that caused discomfort was her sorority recruitment process. Throughout the recruitment process, sometimes, the topic of conversation would land on family. If it got to parents and Lucy mentioned that her dad passed away, there always seemed to be an awkward pause that followed. She also mentioned this awkwardness during various first-year ice-breaking activities, such as "say something unique about your family." She questioned, "do I respond with, hey, I don't have a dad and ruin the first day, or should I make something up." Lucy also felt like no one understood what she was going through,

I felt as if no one fully understood how I was feeling. I didn't want anyone to like see me cry, whereas my sisters they both started seeing a therapist almost right away. And like, so no one understood.

Apart from the orientation and recruitment moments, Lucy thought about her dad throughout the semester. She mentioned that these times made her sad even though they were happy moments.

[B]efore college started in my senior high school when I found out that I ended up getting into my current university. My first instinct was I had already faced by my mom, so the next thing I needed to do was text my dad. So, I had gone to text him, and there hadn't been any text there for three months. So, that was something that kind of happened a lot during my first semester. Like, when I got into the sorority that I wanted to get into, call my mom, text because my dad wouldn't be able to like answer his phone at work. So, I would always just text him anything.

When she had these happy moments, Lucy remembered that her dad was not there to text her anymore made her sad. These moments would also negatively impact her academics and social life throughout her first year.

Grief, grieving definitely affected my first year of college in both my academic and social life academics, I would say more so. It would stall my motivation and like desire to do my work even though I knew like me getting it done with like help me feel better just about myself. In general, like that I wouldn't be dwelling on something. There were definitely more days than I could count on two hands that like I just had no motivation to do anything at all.

Lucy noted that one of the ways she navigated her first year of school was through her peers' support. While she found that most of her peers did not understand or even know that her father passed away, having a roommate who also lost a father helped. Her roommate was able to understand what she was going through and help her through the bad days.

Lucy's recommendation for her university was clear.

I wanted like a guide sort of for other first-year students who might be experiencing something similar to even though like I choose to not see a therapist for the reasons that I do to try to try it at least once to use the services of the school offers for like a mental health to just try it.

She also wished the university were more aware of what she and other people like her were going through. Finding resources or a support group would have been necessary had her roommate not been a source of support throughout her first year. Finally, she wished that other students take a different route than she did and express their emotions and find help when they need it.

Alexis' Story

Alexis chose to attend Southeast Research University for her first year and began studying Agricultural Communication. Alexis was from a small town in a Southeastern state. Her goal was to become a 4-H educator and travel around Southeast state and educate youth about agriculture. Alexis suddenly lost her mom just before her senior year of high school while on a class field trip. Like other participants, Alexis chose to participate in this research because she has a passion for helping others who have lost someone close to them, as she did with her mom. Here is Alexis's story.

Alexis chose to share a photo of her mom, her dad, and her on stage at a 4-H event where she ended her term on an executive board. She chose this photo because, to her, it represented a sense of “the calm before the storm.” Shortly after the photo was taken, Alexis experienced grief across her family, including her grandfather, aunt, and mom. When she looked at the picture, she recalls her mom fondly, and it reminds her of all the good times before her mom’s passing. Before coming to Southeast Research University, Alexis graduated as valedictorian of her class. Because it was one of her first big moments after her mom passed, she remembered graduation day as very hard for her, especially during her graduation speech. In reflection on her senior year and graduation, Alexis stated that she felt like there was little time to calm down and reflect on her experiences because she was off to be a camp counselor the next day.

In August, Alexis arrived at SRU thinking it was going to be just like moving into camp. However, this was most certainly not the case. She described her dad as “being a mess because they always dreamed of moving her in with her mom.”

Alexis had difficulty with move-in and sorority recruitment. While everyone seemed sympathetic, having to retell her story at every event became monotonous.

But everyone always, when you go through rush, ask about your family. And so, I was already facing the difficulty of moving in and not having my mom and wishing she was there to help me decorate and just kind of do the girly stuff. And then I was going to rush in every single house, every single day was asking me – well, I’m so sorry, you lost her mom, I’m so sorry you lost your mom over and over and over again to the point where you just almost didn’t seem sincere. Like, I know they probably meant it, but just hearing it so much. And so, then you would go back to the dorm, and you’d be unpacking,

thinking, man, I wish my mom was here to help me decorate this and finish getting all this setup. So, it was rough.”

Throughout her first year, grief impacted Alexis in a variety of ways. At first, she discussed the big moments that impacted her. For example, Mother’s Day weekend, her mom’s birthday, or mother-daughter weekend with her sorority were difficult days. However, for Alexis, it was more than just the big moments. She also felt grief during the little moments throughout her first year and beyond.

[B]ut then I think, really important for me is the days that were just normal days. And I’m not saying every day, but there are some days you just, it just hits you like a truck. Like, you have no idea where it came from. It could have been anything. You could have been walking down the street and smelt mac and cheese and thought of her favorite mac and cheese recipe, which I – it happened one day. And after that, like, you’re just done for the day and you don’t want to do anything.

When she returned for Thanksgiving and winter breaks, Alexis also described a changing dynamic. Because she lost her mom and her dog within a few days of each other, she explained that the house was much quieter, and she missed the sounds of her mom moving around with her dog shortly behind her. Coming home, she began to miss the food and dishes her mom used to cook and the smells used to fill her house.

Finances and financial aid were major difficulties that Alexis faced throughout her first year at school. Specifically, Alexis struggled with FAFSA and financial aid. Similarly to Lucy, because Alexis lost her mom so close to her first year, her financial aid and FAFSA still reflected a two-income household. However, this was not the case. The logistical hoops that Alexis had to go through to correct the FAFSA were very frustrating and created challenges during her first

year and subsequent years. Alexis also mentioned sometimes connecting with peers was difficult. She recalled several times where her peers lacked the understanding of what she was going through and told her to get over it.

However, not everything was a struggle for Alexis during her first year. She mentioned that joining her sorority was a highlight of her first year. Through her sorority, she met a group of friends that provides social support. The women she met became her close friends and confidants. She also mentioned the strong connection she has with her father as a constant source of support. Through her family and peer connections, she was able to finish her first year.

Alexis stated that she felt that she did not process her grief throughout her first year. She stated, "I would tough it out. You know, I'd go to work, and I'd just kind of shove it all down, but I wouldn't say that's dealing with it or navigating with it." Another coping mechanism was to keep busy. By keeping busy, she could not focus so much on her grief and build connections and SRU.

Alexis had a suggestion for SRU to help others who had similar experiences as her, I think, especially at Southeast Research University, one of the big things is like networking and finding your place and joining clubs and finding groups of people. And I don't know that I ever would have been the person to go to. Like, I hate to call it a dead parents' club meeting, but like a dead parents' club meeting."

Quinn's Story

Quinn had just finished her first semester at Southeast Research University when her best friend passed away from suicide. Quinn described herself as driven, hardworking, and kind. She says she strived to try to be there for the people in her life. She chose to come to SRU because

she felt like there was a tight-knit community during her campus tour, and she has loved it ever since. Here is Quinn's story.

Quinn chose to share a photo of her friend at the beach just before Quinn left for college. She chose this photo because it was the last happy memory that she has of her friend before she passed away. What Quinn remembered from the time when this photo was taken was that she was utterly carefree. For her, the photo she chose to share brought back joy and happiness. Quinn emphasized the importance of kindness when reminiscing about her photo,

I think that being kind matters. [I] think that people really resonate with how you make them feel; I'm talking about the most important thing. I'm like above status, above wealth, above like all your career aspiration is being kind to people because you don't know, you never know[what] anyone[is] going through.

Quinn started her first year in college normally since her friend did not pass away until December of her first year. She participated in everything, such as joining a sorority, going to classes, hanging out with friends, and in general, have a good time. However, when her friend passed in December, her first-year experience completely changed.

The first difficulty she shared was leaving her home from winter break to come back to campus for the spring semester. When thinking about coming back to school, Quinn explained, None of us want to really go back because it felt like we were leaving her behind in a sense, I guess because we're just going to go about our lives. But she wouldn't get to go about hers anymore. And so, we really struggled going back and starting over and like going to class, my grades that semester was miserable."

During that first semester without her friend, Quinn spent a lot of time in bed thinking of the "what ifs." Since she lost a friend from high school, it was hard to return to school and get back

into the routine without her. She felt like there was some dissonance because, at home, nothing was going to be normal again, but at school, everything was the same as it had been during her first semester. One of Quinn's major support systems at school was her roommate. When she talked to other people about her experience, there was shock and a level of understanding. Not many people knew what she was going through and had only seen it on television or in movies. Because of this, she did not tell many people at SRU that she had recently lost a friend. When Quinn would disclose to her peers that she had recently lost a friend, many people would ask her why she was not over it yet. Reflecting on how she felt about her peers telling her to get over it, she shared, "It makes me feel awful. It makes you feel really weak because it's like maybe I should be over it, maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I'm telling taking me a week, maybe I should be moving on."

Quinn re-experienced her grief during both the little moments and the big moments. Anytime there was some celebration or significant life achievement, she missed her friend because she should have been there to celebrate. But it was not just the big moments; it was the little moments like texting about a boy or having small conversations when she re-experienced grief. A positive change since her friend passed was her relationship with her peers from high school. Her circle no longer accepts the "I'm fine response." Throughout and after her first year, Quinn experienced her grief in waves. She accurately pointed out that grief does not end but comes in waves. She explained,

I think it was a misconception that like at a certain point you'll just be like perfectly okay, you'll never cross your mind again. I mean, maybe that works for some people maybe it does, I don't know. But for me particularly, I needed to know that it was going to continue like coming in waves for the lack of better metaphor. Like it wasn't going to be

just like a switch that you would flip. Like it would just constantly be there, and it will be there forever because that's like the life and impact the people have on you."

Reflecting on her first year Quinn wished that there were more resources available to her at SRU. She explained the importance of resources,

I was fortunate to have a professor that I did have the semester before who like noticed. But I think that would have been a very different situation given the class sizes, a freshman year given, just like the sheer number of kids they saw. And it's not necessarily their fault, either it's not to fault teachers for this. But I think that there has to be more, just like more adult resources that don't necessarily have to be after the fact. Like they don't have to be like once something happens then there's someone to go to.

Elise's Story

Elise was a first-year student at MidAtlantic State University when her best friend and ex-boyfriend unexpectedly passed away on Halloween. Elise described herself as "introverted until you get to know me, and then I become a very bubbly person." She also stated that she is organized, keeps a level head, and always tries to have a positive attitude. She chose to attend MidAtlantic State University because her mom attended that university, grew up around it, and always loved the school. Here is Elise's story.

Elise and her loved one attended the same high school. The photo she chose to share was one of the last photos that she ever took with him in their senior biomedical science class. She noted that her loved one was wearing his favorite Superman shirt that she kept after he passed away. When she thinks about the photo, one emotion that came up for Elise was longing. She stated that she misses him every day. She stated that she was especially missing him now that she is finishing her master's degree in clinical psychology. When they graduated high

school, they had dreams of going to MidAtlantic State University and working in the medical field together. When she looks at the photo and thinks of becoming successful in the medical field, she realizes that she is fulfilling their dream but without him.

Elise's first year began similarly to most first-year students. She described being super excited and happy about going to MidAtlantic. She joined the dance team and was enjoying all her classes. However, about two months into her first semester on Halloween weekend, that all changed when her loved one passed away unexpectedly at a party out of town.

This triggered an almost immediate change in Elise. She stated,

I was just, like how I was so happy and bubbly up until Halloween and then I was just a completely different person, I never wanted to leave my room, I never wanted to go out and do anything, I never slept, I didn't, I lost 20pounds, I was having a really, really hard time.

Elise also described trouble with her peers and family and, in general, a lack of support. When she came home from MidAtlantic a few weeks after Halloween, she found a complete lack of understanding from her parents. While her parents knew they had been close, they did not understand the extent of their relationship. They questioned why she was so upset about the situation and asked why she was so broken up about it. Elise also lacked support from her former friends from high school. She stated that her friends from high school blamed her for her loved one's death. Since he died at a party, they all believed he had died from alcohol poisoning. However, he passed away from an unknown heart condition. Her family and friends' lack of support was extremely difficult and created problems during her breaks from MidAtlantic State.

Elise experienced grief frequently during her first year at MidAtlantic and beyond. She and her loved one were meant to pursue a medical career together. However, after his passing,

just going to class reminded her that he was not there, and he was supposed to be in the same classes as her. Her grief experience during class was so great she changed her major. She also mentioned that she thinks about him in all the big moments and life events as well. For example, she visits his grave every year on his birthday and Halloween. Something hard for Elise was realizing that he passed away so young; he was only 17. She also struggled with the recognition that he had so much potential but never got to live his dreams. Comparing the grief for her friend to her grandmother, she stated it was completely different. Her grandmother was sick for a long time and was in her 90s, but her friend was only 17 and died of a heart attack. One of her biggest struggles with his death was that he never experienced any of the things he wanted to experience in college.

To navigate her first year the best she could, she tried to stay as busy as possible. Because she could not sleep, she focused on academics at night. She also joined a sorority, the cheer team, and continued to participate in the dance team. She tried doing any activity to keep her mind from her loss. Elise wanted MidAtlantic to know how much she was struggling with her loss during her first year. She discussed this through her experience with the MidAtlantic Counseling Center,

I would have liked MidAtlantic to know how much I really was struggling. [I] wish the counseling center would have had better resources for me to be like, hey, I do not even know how to be an adult. And I do not, I really don't know how to deal with this. [I] really have no idea how to deal with like my crumbling life in front of me like I need help. And I wish there would be more professionals than students.

Denise's Story

Denise was a first-year student at Southeast Private University at the time of the interview who was double majoring in psychology and sociology. Just six weeks before the interview, Denise had suddenly lost her roommate. Denise described herself as hardworking, driven, goal-oriented, and compassionate. This is Denise's story.

Denise tragically lost her roommate during the first week of her second semester at Southeast Private University. While having known her roommate for a few months, she profoundly impacted Denise's life. She chose a photo of her and her roommate from a few months prior on her roommates' birthday. The photo reminded her of when she and her friends from college were all happier and not grieving. Denise wanted the world to know the positive impact her roommate had on her in such a short amount of time.

As a first-year student during COVID-19, Denise had as normal a first semester as possible; however, that all changed her second semester. Her world suddenly changed after her roommate's passing. One of the first things she recalled was how the campus community reacted to her roommate's death. While the housing professionals were good and immediately moved Denise from her room, the community reaction, especially the student newspaper, was a bit off. She felt that because it was COVID and first-year students, the community did not know her roommate well and did not do her memory justice.

A struggle for Denise was giving a eulogy at her roommate's funeral. Denise identifies as Black, and her roommate was white. Although her roommate's family was always nice to her, she noticed subtle racist vibes. This was challenging to navigate. Also challenging to navigate was speaking at the funeral. Denise knew things about her roommate's personal life that her

family did not know. For Denise trying to navigate being true to her roommate's memory and keeping her life private was difficult. Denise felt like, during her eulogy, she was lying.

The days after her roommate's passing, Denise was in total shock. Although she moved out of her old room, initially going back in to move her stuff was very difficult for Denise. However, after moving and the initial shock wore off, Denise experienced grief and difficulties in a new way. One of these difficulties was in academics. Because Denise had missed so much school, she was way behind in her classes. Trying to grieve and catch up on her school was a struggle. She discussed her difficulties by describing her experience.

And I realized, like probably two days ago, that I am a little more depressed than I was. Maybe like a month ago, I wasn't really expecting it at all. My boyfriend was like, how are you feeling? And I was like, oh, I'm fine. But, you know, recently I felt like I'm lacking motivation like I feel like two weeks ago I was giving 125% to catch up on all of my work. And now I feel like I don't have anything else to give.”

Another difficulty for Denise was with peer interactions. She stated that her college friend group was all reacting to her roommate's passing in different ways. Sometimes she got so frustrated with them that she did not want to be around them. However, her friend group was her only support system, so she felt like she still needed them.

Denise was still very much in the beginning stages of the grieving process at the time of the interview. Denise received plenty of support from Southeast Private University, and for that, she was grateful. She wanted her peers, faculty, and staff at Southeast Private University to know that “When you're looking from the outside, and you're kind of like, well, maybe they should be over this by now... I don't know what my professors are assuming, but I'm most definitely not over it.”

Lisa's Story

When Lisa entered her first year at Southeast Research University, life without her father was the norm. Lisa was only four years old when she lost her father unexpectedly to cancer. Although Lisa's dad passed away almost 15 years prior, she has felt it throughout her life. Lisa described herself as very independent, outgoing, and motivated to do well in school. She cited her major and desire to help children going through difficulty stemming from the loss of her dad at such a young age. This is Lisa's story.

Lisa chose to share a photo of her and her dad during the summer of 2004, which was the year before he passed away. In the photo, Lisa's father was teaching her how to hold a baseball bat. She chose this photo for a few reasons. The first reason was that this is one of Lisa's last photos with her dad. However, this photo also demonstrates how hands-on her dad was with her and her brother as children. When she looked at the photo, she thought about if her dad had been around growing up, how he would have been at all her cheer competitions and been at every football game. For Lisa, this photo brought back emotions of happiness and nostalgia.

Growing up, Lisa stated that she was always the girl whose dad died. While her peers were supportive, they also had never experienced anything similar, so they had difficulty understanding her experiences. By middle school, another one of her peers lost a parent, and through that shared experience, they became friends. Throughout our interview, Lisa mentioned a few times wondering "what if," meaning what would life be like if her father was still around. While Lisa experienced grief throughout her life, it hit both her and her mom during move-in weekend. Lisa described her move-in experience,

And then I think it hit my mom and me both whenever we moved into my dorm, my first year. And it was me, my mom, and my little brother helping us move in. And we didn't

have like the man to help us like pick up the heavy things, like me and my mom were both very, very short, like didn't have us to help pick up the big things and then my roommate that I was with, her father also passed away. So, it was like all of us didn't really have the help that we could have used if, like my dad, we're here. And then, so it was really hard like knowing that I'm about to start a whole new basically like chapter of my life and I don't have him here with me, like what would you -- like I was always wondering like what would he think, like would he be proud, knowing that he would just kind of like always questioning, like what could have been like, if he were here what would have happened? How would things be different?

Lisa also stated that having a roommate whose father also passed away altered her experiences of grief throughout her first year. Because her roommate's experience was much newer, she felt like she was re-experiencing grief through her. While it was difficult, it was nice to have someone who felt the same way.

One of her difficulties during her first year came during her second semester. During this semester, she began taking chemistry, and she had a hard time managing her anxiety around the course. She believed that most of her anxiety stemmed from losing her dad at such a young age and not having an outlet to process those emotions. Another challenge for Lisa was having the semester cut short because of the 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Because lockdown was co-occurring as the fifteenth anniversary of her dad's passing, it was challenging to be at home and process those emotions. Again Lisa mentioned relying on her social support networks via her roommate to help her process.

Something unique to Lisa's story was her grieving experience with her mom. As she got older, she noticed that while her mom had been a constant source of support and understood the

grief of losing a husband, there was a lack of understanding about losing a parent. Lisa recalled times when her mom's friends had lost parents and shock that something like that could happen. In the interview, Lisa remarked that losing a parent was normal for her and her peer support network. However, it was not normal for Lisa's mom, and she still did not fully understand the grief that comes with losing a parent.

Lisa stated, "I would say 100% shaped me into like who I am." The experience of losing her dad made her more motivated, especially in school, and made her more independent. She wanted others going through a similar experience to know that they should not keep their feelings just to themselves.

Elizabeth's Story

When Elizabeth was in middle school, her brother was killed in Afghanistan. By the time she started her first year at Northeast Private College, her brother had been gone for about seven years. She chose to go to Northeast Private College because her other brother had attended the school. Elizabeth described herself as very family-oriented, smart, and goofy. This is Elizabeth's story.

First, Elizabeth decided to describe a photo of her brother holding her when she was just a baby. Elizabeth likes this photo because it demonstrates how her brother was almost like a third parent while growing up. She also says the photo reminds her that even though her brother is not with her right now, he is still her protector. Finally, this photo brings her happiness and joy because even though her brother's life ended early, she still spent ten good years with him, and he had a significant impact on her life.

Elizabeth was from a small town in a Northeastern State and chose to attend Northeast Private College, which is just over an hour away from home. Since her brother was a Marine and

was killed in Afghanistan, most people in the town knew her and her family's story. This was a significant reason Elizabeth chose to leave her hometown for college. Here is how she described her experience,

I chose to get away because I struggle a lot with people in the area knowing everything about my family. And I said before I hate going to the grocery store and people, it's like they're not even trying to be subtle about it, they'll say like, "Oh, that's Jordan's little sister." So, I really think a huge part of Jordan being gone was the reason why I left because I wanted to make, I wanted to be Elizabeth, I didn't want to be Jordan's little sister my entire life.

Elizabeth also recalled her experiences during the move-in weekend. She was very anxious and that her mom was a mess dropping her off at Northeast Private College. Unlike some other participants, Elizabeth chose not to disclose that her brother had passed during the first few weeks of school. She decided not to say anything to anyone because she did not want anyone to feel bad for her or be awkward around her. Even her roommate did not know for the first couple of weeks of school.

After about six weeks into her first year, Elizabeth decided to begin sharing with her peers about her brother. In the interview, she stated this was because she started getting close to a group of peers right around then, and they began becoming more vulnerable with each other. While at school, Elizabeth stated she started to build stronger connections with her peers through similar experiences. She described her experiences meeting new people during her first year,

Learning about other people who've lost people, which I think that is one of like I would say the number one thing people bond over. Because I think it's an indescribable feeling in other people. I think, at school, it was like their friends were friends, and then it's like,

oh, I just dropped the atomic bomb that like my brother is gone, and then, oh, another person just their parent is gone. And the next person talks about how like their dad may not be gone, but they never knew him. And then that's such a bigger and better relationship and support so like friend wise at college. I think it was great. You know, it made your support so much better.

While Elizabeth was building connections with her peers, not everything was smooth sailing. She stated she had a personal conflict between becoming the person she wanted to be and remembering her brother during the first few weeks. Coming from a religious family, Elizabeth spent time praying to her brother during this time. Since her brother passed several years ago, several memorials around her town commemorate him. Because of this, learning to be herself without these constant reminders of her brother was a struggle.

Elizabeth mentioned that something that stems from her brother's passing is that she does not like being singled out, especially in a classroom setting. A struggle she had during her first year, however, was taking a political science course. After discussing her brother in class one day, she continued to be singled out in class throughout the semester whenever issues regarding the military came up. This was a constant struggle for Elizabeth throughout her first semester.

For Elizabeth, one thing that changed and got worse during her first year was her anxiety. For her, her anxiety was caused by almost two separate lives, one of becoming who she wanted to be, and the other was who she was at home, which is Jordan's little sister. Elizabeth wished that her university was more aware of her struggles. She wished her advisor knew more about her and described her experience,

Your advisors should know more about you before signing up for these classes, which I know is very difficult, but like 30 freshmen every year, and I do not know how many

students they have starting. But knowing that that is a huge issue and advisors would probably make it easier.

Ashley's Story

During Ashley's first week at Southeast State College, her grandfather passed away. Ashley described her relationship with her grandfather as special because he was always there for her family. An example Ashley used was when her family was homeless; her grandfather took them in. Ashley was on the track team during high school, and her grandfather never missed a meet. Ashley described herself as an introvert-extrovert, a self-starter, and someone who likes to do things independently. This is Ashley's story.

Ashley chose to share a photo of she and her grandfather on her graduation night. She chose this photo because it represented how often he was there for her throughout her life. The photo was meaningful to her because it was the last photo that she has with her grandfather. Like other participants, when Ashley looked at the photo, it gave her a bittersweet feeling. She felt bittersweet because she wished that he were still alive but happy because she believed he “is in a better place.”

Ashley recalled move-in weekend being hard for her. She came from a rural town in the Southeast, and she just moved to a large city. She remembers crying in the elevator the moment after her parents left because she did not want to be at Southeast State College. Within one week of Ashley's move-in, her grandfather had passed away. Ashley described how she felt alone at that moment at school. Ashley felt alone for two reasons. One, she did not tell anyone at school that she was grieving the loss of her grandfather. However, she also did not have a car at Southeast State College, so she could not attend the funeral. Although she did not have a car, she did not want to attend the funeral because she was not ready to face it yet.

For Ashley, she experienced occurrences of grief during the early mornings and late at night. This was because she interacted most with her grandfather as he was on his way to work. Ashley noted that grief had a considerable impact on her first semester at school.

On a scale from 1 to 10, I would say an eight because I was a student-athlete at the same time, and that was also another adjustment I had to make because my body was going through a lot of changes from high school to college. So, there were times where like I was missing, like weightlifting, or I was getting up late because I was oversleeping or like forcing myself to go back to sleep. And I wasn't performing that well my first semester. In my first college race, I fell over the hurdles, and to me, that's where it significantly hit me. And academically, I was strong coming out of high school. But my first semester of college wasn't the strongest, and I feel like it was just a combination of adjusting and grieving at the same time. And it wasn't really successful for my part.

Throughout her first semester, Ashley barely discussed with anyone that she was grieving her grandfather. Losing her grandfather caused Ashley to become more closed off and guarded. While she used her family as a support system, she did not talk to anyone at school about her grandfather. However, finally, she disclosed to her track coach, who got her in contact with the College's counseling services. Another support system was her roommate. After a few weeks, she finally disclosed to her about her grandfather, and Ashley felt her roommate became a significant support system.

Ashley also briefly discussed her views on how race and grief intersect. She described that she was still grieving her grandfather's loss when she came home from winter break, but it seemed like everyone else in her family had moved on. She thought they did not talk about grief

or mental health because she came from a Black family. This made her feel more alone. To help her cope with all her feelings of loneliness, Ashley wrote in her journal.

Her experience with her university was overall positive. She described her experiences by stating,

I would like them to know that I appreciate them because at Southeast State University, I mean it is a medical school, so once you actually do get a student outreach like they do everything that they can for us. Everything that they did for me, I think, was right. And that's what I would tell them.

Jason's Story

Jason was on his way to orientation before his first year at the University of the Southeast when his father unexpectedly passed away. Jason described himself as a direct and to-the-point person. He also said that he was an honest and loyal person. He chose to go to the University of the Southeast because he got in-state tuition and felt he would get “more bang for his buck.” This is Jason's story.

Jason decided to share a photo of him, his dad, and his older brother playing in the middle of the living room floor. His dad was such a fun-loving and easy-going guy that this photo exemplified this characteristic. He also chose this photo because it showed that his dad and his family did not need a whole lot, but they were happy with what they had. The photo shows that his dad was so good at making the best out of every situation and was a glass-half-full kind of guy. When Jason looks at photos of his dad, they usually bring him sadness. However, when he looked at this photo, it makes him happy and allows him to remember all the happy times he had with his dad before he passed.

Jason openly admitted that his first semester was rough. Throughout his first semester at school, he wanted guidance from his dad, but he was not there anymore. Another reason for his difficult semester was because Jason did not tell many people that his dad had just passed away. Jason did not tell many people about his dad because he was meeting all these new people and did not want to be the “buzzkill” at the party. Here Jason describes what it was like when he did tell his peers his dad had recently passed away:

I mean, it's the classic. It ranges, but they're mostly-- They give you the, "Oh I'm sorry." That was like the main one like, "Oh, I'm sorry." Then the awkward silence but then-- Which is fine, and I was good with that, but the other ones that like made me mad, which sounds bad, but they're like, "Oh my God, I totally know what you're going through." I was like they lost your great-great-great-uncle or a cousin."

One major support system that Jason mentioned throughout his college transition was his family. After his dad's sudden passing, they were even more supportive of Jason going to college. Jason explained why his family support was a key to his success during his first year,

I think [family] was like a big key to success because instead of being guilt-tripping me in going to college still because money was tight or my mom like being, "Oh I need you back at home. Like being needy, they were like, "No go. Go to school, have a life. Don't let it define you." I think having them do that made the process a lot easier.

Jason also thought about his dad almost every day during the first year of school. Some of the little moments that came up for him were through music. His dad loved listening to music, so anytime he hears a song or listened to music his dad liked, it was just a brutal reminder that he had just lost him. Jason also discussed missing his dad for advice and guidance about how to handle the transition. Another struggle for Jason during his first year was his academics.

Grieving his father had a role in his struggle with his entry-level engineering classes. When I asked Jason if he felt his grief impacted his academics, he said, "Yes, probably looking back yes. Having a dead dad and then taking your first Calc2 exam probably doesn't mix well looking back. I wouldn't blame 100% on it, but it definitely played like-- It's a factor."

Jason also struggled with losing his only positive male role model in his life. Jason was the only man that I interviewed, so we had a moment of understanding of this aspect. We discussed how there were several things that we do not know how to do that others may know about, like how to tie a tie or shave, that we would have learned from our dads, but they could not provide that guidance. Jason missed his dad throughout college when he needed advice.

Jason also experienced anxiety, depression, and anger related to his dad's death. One of his mistakes was not talking about it more with his peers. However, over time he has gotten more open and has used his peers as a resource. In reflection, he was much sadder his first year than he thought at the time, and he wished he had seen a counselor or talked to someone. Jason advised other first-year students and his university by explaining his experience,

I was a lot sadder than I thought I was looking back on it because I tried to go to a counselor. But those things are for like people that are going to throw themselves off a bridge tomorrow, and when they see me, I was functioning, and everything but I needed help. I think they kind of like passed me off as like, "Oh, you're okay." Like they check all the boxes like, oh you have a support group, oh you're working out that's good. I needed more help, like I was still pretty stressed out more than anybody else looking back.

Common Themes Across Participant Narratives

Through the participant stories, it is easy to see that grief impacted each student during their first year of college student differently. Although each story was unique, I noted various commonalities across the nine interviews. In this section I will present the four overarching themes that I identified from the data; experiences and re-experiences of grief, peer interactions, coping mechanisms, and participants reasons for participating in the study.

Theme 1. “A lot of the obvious [milestone] days, but really important for me is the days that were just normal”: Experiencing and/or Re-experiencing Grief.

As demonstrated in the individual stories’, participants were at various points in their grief. Some participants had lost their loved ones over 15 years prior, while others only six weeks had passed. Each participant who experienced a loss before their first semester stated several moments throughout the first semester in college where they were re-experiencing their grief. The participants who lost someone during their first year discussed the moments where they experienced grief. The experiences or re-experiences of grief were seen in both big moments and little moments throughout their first year.

Big moments. Throughout the participant’s stories, there were experiences or re-experiences of grief. While each participant’s notion of a big moment was unique, the concept of grieving during major life events was discussed throughout most of the interviews. Grieving students can experience grief before their first semester even starts, during move-in weekend for example. Elizabeth experienced grief before she even stepped foot on-campus by discussing her car ride to her institution “It was terrible because I knew my mom was just a disaster.” Arriving on-campus also caused some participants to experience grief. While Lisa lost her dad 15 years before her first weekend in school, she discussed how grief hit her during move-in,

And then I think it really hit my mom and I both whenever we moved into my dorm, my first year. And it was me, my mom and my little brother helping us move in. And we didn't have like the man to help us like pick up the heavy things, like me and my mom were both very, very short, like didn't have us to help pick up the big things and then the roommate that I was with, her father also passed away.

Alexis also experienced grief before classes even began at SRU,

And so, then you would go back to the dorm, and you'd be unpacking, thinking, man, I wish my mom was here to help me decorate this and finish getting all this setup. So, it was rough. I mean, I don't know, it was just interesting and different I suppose.

Grieving college students may experience grief before their first year even starts at move-in weekend. Elizabeth, Lisa, and Alexis all mentioned move-in weekend as a big moment when they experienced grief. While move-in is an example of one moment that may impact grieving first-year students, it was not the only big moment. For many of the participants, the big moments were also because of a personal attachment to their loved ones. For example, Lucy grieved for her father on September 11th,

Probably, the most significant day of my first semester of college was 9/11. My dad he worked in the South Tower up until pretty much exactly a year before 9/11. And he knew so many people who had passed away. And every year, we would just like sit in my living room and like watch all the documentaries about that day and just cry together. So, 9/11 rolled around, I skipped all my classes for the day and I just sat home, because like with the exception of like, Christmas and my dad's birthday and on the anniversary of his death like that was probably the day that I connected with him the most.

While Alexis discussed how move-in weekend was a big moment for her, she also discussed how big moments or milestone days impacted her throughout her first year at college, Definitely on the big milestone days, if you will. So, her birthday, Mother's Day, the day she passed, the one-year anniversary, the two-year anniversary, I guess, would have been the summer after my freshman year. So, that day, of course, all of the big kind of milestone days, their anniversary, but also those days, like I said, for my sorority when we had the mother's weekend, that was really hard. And then the big milestone days for college too, so, like, my birthday that year, moving in, I really missed her.

Alexis was not the only participant who discussed how grief anniversaries and birthdays impacted them. Elise, for example, discussed how every Halloween was a struggle for her,

Oh, every Halloween, I was a mess. Like the first Halloween after he died. I, I went out and I like had really bad PTSD of like getting the text like he's dead...I still get like weird and like uncomfortable and upset around Halloween. I don't think that will ever go away, I will just always be upset on Halloween.

While Alexis, Quinn, and Lucy all discussed anniversaries, birthdays, or other important days, grief also can impact first-year students during any type of celebration. Quinn explained why celebrations throughout her first year caused her to experience grief,

Anytime there was like some kind of celebration or like life achievement those are the hardest because they would -- like she would have been there for those kinds of situations.

Many of my participants discussed how they experienced grief during major events during their first year. For some, these big moments occur before they even step onto campus during move-in weekend. For others, these milestones and anniversaries can be throughout the

year. While big moments can be a cause for celebration in some grieving students, the big moments that occur throughout the first year can also cause them to re-experience their loss.

Small moments. While many participants spoke of the big moments that caused them to experience or re-experience grief, most also discussed the little moments that caused them pain. For many of the participants, this grief was more difficult because these moments were unexpected and could throw off the rest of their day. Similar to the big moments, little moments were unique to the participants. However, most participants spoke about how grief would hit them during the mundane or day to day.

Unlike big moments, small moments could not be anticipated by participants. For Alexis, sometimes these moments would come from nowhere,

But then I think, really important for me is the days that were just normal days. And I'm not saying every day, but there are some days you just, it just hits you like a truck. Like, you have no idea where it came from. It could have been anything. You could have been walking down the street and smelt mac and cheese and thought of her favorite mac and cheese recipe, which I – it happened one day. and after that you're just done for the day and you don't want to do anything.

Jason, like Alexis, also experienced little moments on normal days that caused him to re-experience grief throughout his first year,

Oh my God yes every day. My dad loved music like that was his thing. Probably in that picture I showed you there was music playing in the background so listening-- I always listen to music like studying, working out so God-like listening to-- Just music was brutal and I did that every day so that was a big one.

Quinn, like Jason, re-experienced grief for small daily reasons, “anything like for me like trivially I guess it’s just like texting her about a boy or like wanting to tell her like oh, this is what happened today, but like not having those conversations anymore.” Ashley also missed her grandfather the most in the small moments by saying, “the only time it really hit me was when I was getting ready for bed, going to sleep early in the morning.” While not every day Lucy also experienced grief during small moments of happiness that she wanted to share,

First thing, let me text to my dad. But it was just kind of moments like that where even in times of extreme happiness like we just won a huge football game for the year. It would sort of bring me down a little bit.”

Many of the participants experienced grief during big moments throughout their first year. While some of these big moments are almost universal to the college experience, like move-in weekend, many of these big moments are personal days like anniversaries or birthdays. While big moments were important, equally important were the small daily moments that reminded participants of their loved ones. This theme demonstrates that grief can impact first-year students at various times throughout their college experience.

Theme 2. “I mean it’s the classic... ‘Oh I’m sorry.’ Then the awkward silence”: Peer Interaction Impacts on Grieving Student Transition

In theme 1, I presented evidence on how participants experienced grief through big moments and little moments. However, participants also interacted with others throughout their grief process. I called this theme peer interactions because of the varied nature of the interaction’s participants had with their peers. A major aspect of the participant narratives was the lack of understanding of grief by their peers. This lack of understanding leads to negative interactions or awkward moments.

Furthermore, some participants had little interaction with peers because they chose not to disclose their grief. However, participants also created peer connections that offered them support. This support was integral in their transition process throughout their first year.

Lack of Understanding. Most participants discussed interactions with their peers. One common theme across most of the interviews was the lack of understanding from their peers. Most participants discussed this lack of understanding. The participants who did not discuss this theme stated that they chose not to disclose to their peers about their grief. Elise had this blunt statement regarding the lack of understanding of her peers,

Yes. People don't know, especially people that have never experienced grief don't know what to do or say and then they always say the wrong thing and it just makes it worse and it creates a rift between the relationship and that's what happened with a lot of my friends because they just either didn't understand or didn't know what to say and they would always like say the wrong thing and it would just make me more distant to them.

Quinn also discussed how her peers were shocked and lacked understanding when she discussed the passing of her friend,

I think it was a shock reaction to those that I did tell. None of them had deal anything like that before. So, I think it was like, they've only seen it in movies or TV shows and still having someone like actually deal with that they didn't know what to say.

While Quinn and Elise were more general in their discussion of how their peers lacked an understanding, Alexis and Lucy discussed how grief impacted getting to know their roommates and other first-year peers. Because of her grief Alexis had trouble connecting with her roommates,

And in my freshman year of college, I had a bunch of roommates, I had a lot have friends, but none of them had ever been through the same situation. None of them had ever lost the parent. And so, I never felt like I really connected per se with anyone that had any life experiences.

Lucy also had a hard time connecting to her peers during her first year,

I felt as if no one fully understood, how I was feeling because I had declined going to therapy. I didn't want anyone to like see me cry, whereas, my sisters they both started seeing a therapist almost right away. And like, so no one understood, and I didn't really know how to like, communicate my sadness or my grief onto other people because I had avoided it for so long.

While most participants discussed how their college peers had a difficult time understanding grief, Elizabeth discussed how grief made her distant from her peers throughout high school and college,

Friend wise was very difficult for me. Relating to people younger, like my age, was terrible to go through. I would never let people say they would love to go back to high school. Like I would never come back to high school, like not even one day of high school I would never go back to. It was very tough for me because I was so forced to grow up that people their small problems I almost became just annoyed with everything."

Finally, while Lisa also discussed her experiences with people not understanding, she shared feeling as if her mom did not understand. Recently Lisa's mom has been upset that many of her friend's parents had been passing away. During this time, Lisa realized that her mom did not understand the grief of losing a parent, "she's thinking that it's so crazy and I'm like, mom, the

number of friends I have that have lost parents and me not having one for 15 years, I'm like, I keep forgetting that it's not normal.”

Many of the participants discussed how their peers did not understand grief or their experiences. Literature on first-year students discusses how connecting with peers is important for a successful transition to college (Yazedjian et al., 2007). However, many grieving students may find it difficult to connect with peers because of their life experiences.

The Awkward Moment. Participants, particularly the participants who lost family members, discussed what I called the awkward moment. Most participants who lost parents discussed moments discussing their family dynamics. When family was brought up, and they mentioned they did not have a parent, they would get a pause, and an awkward moment would ensue. While this experience was more prevalent for participants who lost parents and not others, I chose to include it within the themes because it came up across the multiple interviews. The awkward moment could come up at any time. However, my participants experiencing awkwardness with their peers frequently happened during orientation, the first six weeks of school, and sorority recruitment. Lucy, Alexis, and Lisa all discussed how the topic of their parents caused awkward moments during recruitment weekend, which coincided with move-in weekend at their institution. Lucy tried to avoid the topic, but when it came up, she felt awkward, “And then, it would always set, come to, well, I don’t have a dad. And that always really made it awkward. So, I just tried to avoid conversations like that as much as possible.” For Lisa, she always felt like she said something wrong. She explained, “But it was definitely at first like when I said it, I was like, oh, my gosh, like did I mess something up, did I just make them uncomfortable whenever I talked about it.” For Alexis, by the end of the weekend, she began to

dread being asked about her family or home life. She discussed why she hated questions about family,

But when people ask me, I dread the response of saying, oh, well, my mom's deceased, because everyone gives me what I like to call the pity eyes. They give you this look or they're like, I'm so sorry. Like, oh, you poor thing. Like, that's horrible. And while I understand it's horrible and someone that hasn't been through it just doesn't understand it, those pity eyes hurt me more than them asking the question.

While Jason did not participate in Greek Life, he found that discussing his dad's passing caused many of his peers to interact awkwardly throughout his first year. He explained what it was like when his peers found out his dad had passed away,

I mean it's the classic. It ranges, but they're mostly-- They give you the, "Oh I'm sorry." That was like the main one like, "Oh, I'm sorry." Then the awkward silence but then-- Which is fine, and I was good with that, but the other ones that like made me mad, which sounds bad, but they're like, "Oh my God, I totally know what you're going through." I was like, they lost your great-great-great-uncle or a cousin. You know like, "Dude, that is not, and you sound like such alike an ass for saying that, but you're like, "No, because losing your dad is not like that."

The awkward moment or pause that Alexis, Jason, Lucy, and Lisa all experience is that many college students who lost parents may also experience. This awkward pause reinforced the belief that their peers did not understand what they were going through to my participants.

Peer Support. While participants stated that there was awkwardness and lack of understanding, multiple other participants also discussed how building a support network positively impacted their transition to school. With peer interaction, participants also stated some

of the most valuable friendships they developed were with others who had similar experiences. In many instances with lack of understanding and awkward moments interactions, some participants felt disconnected from their peers. However, Elizabeth demonstrated how connecting with other peers who had similar experiences to her aided in her transition to college. Elizabeth explained the importance of finding a peer group that had similar experiences,

You learn more about people, learning about other people who've lost people, which I think that is one of like I would say the number one thing people bond over. Because I think it's an indescribable feeling in other people. I think, at school, it was like their friends were friends and then it's like, oh, I just dropped the atomic bomb that like my brother is gone, and then, oh, another person just their parent's gone. And the next person talks about how like their dad may not be gone, but they never knew him. And then that's such a bigger and better relationship and support so like friend wise at college. I think it was great. You know, it made your support so much better.

Similarly to Elizabeth, Lisa and Lucy found support with people who had similar experiences. Lisa and Lucy were lucky enough to be roommates with each other during their first year. Lucy, who lost her father six months before her first year, explained how her roommate helped her transition to school,

And we found out during the second or third week of school that her father also passed away. Her father passed away when she was four years old, so it had been like quite a long time, and every time that like, something would happen where I would be upset about something like she was always there, and her mom was always there for me, and my mom.

Even though Lisa lost her father 15 years before her first year, she also found that Lucy provided similar support during her transition. Lisa explained,

It was very, sometimes it was like super hard. But it was also really nice to have someone to talk to that understood how you felt. And I'm sure like she felt the same way, because, like it's not something that you want other people to understand and it's not something that you want someone to have to experience, but it's always nice to, and you don't really expect anyone to understand where you're coming from, like understand your feelings. And but it's nice to have someone that does.

Finally, while Quinn relied on her high school friends for support, she also underscores the importance of peer support,

We made like an actual effort to check-in. Not just like oh, hey like what do you do? It was just like how are you? I think it was like the first mature friendship dynamic shift at home....because it was kind of just like unspoken, like we have to be better checking in. Maybe that will help, maybe one of us is different like we don't know right now dealing with something, so I think that was a big thing. It was just like the continued checking in and actually wanted to hear and not just being like oh, like I had so much fun last night. Like, let's go do something else. It was like no, how are you? Like how is everything going? So, I think that was a big change.

Elizabeth, Lucy, Lisa, and Quinn all found peers that had similar experiences to them. Finding a peer helped them transition to school and created closer bonds. Like the first theme, this theme also underscores that there are grieving students on college campuses that are willing to support others. While these participants found that having similar experiences created a supportive environment during their first year, other participants could find peers that provided

support even if they did not have a similar experience. For example, Ashley explained the importance of her relationship with her roommate,

So, it came a time where I felt like I could trust her, so I told her what happened. And then from there, she was supportive, and like waking me up and help me go to sleep at night and making sure, I was eating how I supposed to eat because she could see a practice how, you know, I really wasn't myself. You know, even though we're still learning each other, so she was helping me be accountable when I couldn't be accountable for myself."

While Alexis didn't form a peer group with similar experiences, she discussed how her sorority helped her find support with others,

and so I joined a sorority, I got to go through the big process, and I ended up getting a big – who knew I'd told her about my mom? And she was like one of the very few people I met that didn't look at me with kind of the pity eye thing we were talking about. So, we clicked instantly. And then, my second month then took another little – so, I got a twin, and she and I have literally been inseparable ever since."

Many participants discussed the importance of having positive peer support. This peer support assisted in their transition to school helped them feel connected to the institution. While peer interactions could provide support for some participants, peers could also have negative impacts. Some peer interactions caused my participants to disengage or have difficulty creating connections. Elise's experiences with her peers left her feeling more disconnected and worse. She explained what it was like going home for Thanksgiving break after her friend passed away,

I also came home, and I saw my friends that were in the class with me, that were his friends as well, and they were not welcoming. Because they kind of blamed me because

the whole situation was-I was supposed to go to this party with him where he died...He died from a heart condition, but he did not know he had, he had a heart attack, and they all blamed me. Because they thought he died of alcohol poisoning, and they are like you could have stopped that like you could have been there like no one was there for him like I can't believe you weren't there for him. So, they kind of took it out on me, and it ruined all of our friendship, and I don't talk to any of these people anymore. So, it was really, really rough to go from being at school for a couple months and then coming home to all of that.

Denise also discussed how her peers were a source of frustration during her grieving process. She explained, "something was happening in our friend group, we're like, my friends are all reacting very differently and two of them like butting heads. And I was like I love you guys, but I cannot deal with this right now."

Elise and Denise's interactions with their peers had some negative impacts on their grieving process. However, Jason also had a difficult time with his grief as it related to his peers. Unlike the other participants, Jason chose not to discuss his father's death with anyone at his institution during his first year. However, not having any peer support also made things difficult for him. Jason explained why he chose not to disclose to peers of his dad's passing and the impact it had on his transition,

You can be a totally new person, and it was so tough because you're introducing yourself to all these people, and you don't want to introduce yourself as, "Hey, my dad just died." Like kill any buzz of conversation whether it be even from ranging from a class, to a party. I think the first semester was really rough, and I didn't even tell a lot of people I kept it close to the chest. It was hard."

This theme discussed the importance of peer interactions on grieving college student transition. Many participants found that their peers were either awkward around the concept of grief or lacked an understanding of their experiences. This awkwardness and lack of understanding had a negative impact on grieving students during their first year. However, this theme also reinforces the positive impact peer support can have on grieving college students. Finally, this theme also reinforces the positive impact of creating a support group with other grieving students on the first-year transition.

Theme 3. “If I just like sat there and thought about it, it was just going to spiral out of control”: Participant Coping Mechanisms

For all my participants navigating their first year of college was a challenge. Many of my participants used their peer networks as ways to navigate those many challenges. While peers played a major role, most of my participants discussed various coping mechanisms they utilized to manage their grief and transition process. By far, the most common coping mechanism that each participant discussed was keeping busy. Most participants also discussed how spirituality or religion helped them cope with their loss and transition to school. While these coping mechanisms were the most common, they are not every coping mechanism that my participants utilized to cope with their grief.

Keeping Busy. Most participants I interviewed discussed how they kept busy to help them cope with their grief. The only participant who did not mention keeping themselves busy was Lisa. However, Lisa had lost their loved one the longest ago at 15 years, so this may be why she did not mention keeping busy. My other participants stated that many times when they were alone or did not have much to do, they would dwell on their grief. My participants stated that

they kept themselves busy through academics or extracurriculars to manage these emotions and acculturate to their new environment.

Grief literature has discussed that grieving students tend to have lower GPAs during their death-loss semester than their non-grieving peers (Cupit et al., 2016). However, for some of my participants, the opposite was true. Denise and Elise both emphasized how they focused on their academics to keep themselves busy and cope with their loss. For Denise, she had missed the first week of her second semester to attend her roommate's funeral. When asked how she coped with her loss and coming back to school, she explained, "I was like, work, work, work, busy, busy, busy, got to catch up on all my missed work." Elise also said that she focused on academics to help her cope. She mentioned that no one noticed that she was struggling because she was doing so well in her course. She discussed why focusing on her academics was important to her, "I just tried to keep myself busy because if I just like sat there and thought about it, it was just going to spiral out of control, so I just really kept myself busy with school."

While Elise and Denise used academics to keep busy as a coping mechanism, most of my participants discussed extracurriculars. The extracurriculars ranged from structured campus activities to unstructured hobbies. However, most of the students keeping themselves busy and keeping their minds off their loss helped them cope with their grief. Quinn and Elizabeth discuss how keeping themselves busy helped them not dwell on what they were feeling. Quinn explained why her busiest days were her better days,

And so, like it -- I was just going, going, going to have time to like dwell on it I guess. So like kind of helped me like get back into a sense of normalcy. Not that I -- not that I ever like forgot. But it was just -- there was good days and bad days. And I think the good

days were filled with more activities because simply you couldn't keep your mind on too many things at once.

Elizabeth also discussed how getting involved and doing things with her friends kept her mind from her grief. She shared,

If I was busy, and doing my homework, and going to the mall, and going to church with my friends, or being part of the clubs, and dancing and all that kind of stuff, I wouldn't be upset about it. It would be apparent in my mind, but I wouldn't be like them.

Like Elizabeth mentioned, some of the participants used extracurriculars, clubs, and organizations to cope with their grief. This suggests that student affairs and student affairs professionals can have an impact on the grieving student transition. Lucy explained why getting involved in her sorority helped her cope with her grief and transition,

Things were so fast-paced, even though conversations about it did come up during our spring recruitment time. It was just so busy getting back into the swing of things, moving back in that I didn't really have time to think about it.

Alexis also discussed the importance of clubs and organizations in helping her cope with her grief. She explained how being involved kept her busy,

Keeping myself busy was a big one. I was a high school student, when my mom was around, I never, like, I never took a pause, never slowed down. And so, then when I came to college, I tried really hard to keep myself busy because I found the busier than I was, the less I had to think about grief. And so, that was a really big one for me too".

Jason also used college activities to help him with his transition and grief. He explained how getting involved with an intramural team gave him an outlet,

I was mad, and the way I handled mad is I worked out, I ran a lot, I played, I just put on extracurriculars. I played basketball. I did intermural, so I really had an outlet to let it all go, and that was really nice.

Finally, while Ashley did not use structured extracurriculars, she did mention hobbies as a coping mechanism. She shared,

Journaling was like the number one thing I did. And so, I have a sewing machine. So, I also like would sew like little pieces of cloths together, I should have mentioned that the first time. That's really like my safe haven, this sewing. And I started to read, read a bit more and just I did a lot of things to help me cope.

Almost all my participants shared that a major way they coped with their grief and their transition to college was by keeping busy. For some, this meant engaging with their academics. However, most of my participants chose to keep busy with campus extracurriculars. This suggests that throughout the first year, there are many areas that student affairs professionals can engage and support grieving first-year college students.

Spirituality. Similar to the rest of my themes, this was also unique to each participant that mentioned spirituality. Some of my participants saw signs from their loved ones that let them know that they were still present. For others, they coped by believing that their loved one was in a better place. Finally, some of my participants explicitly stated their religion as a coping mechanism.

For example, Lucy discussed a sign that she believed demonstrated her father's presence when discussing her photo. She shared,

There is a bright red cardinal. And in my family, we, some people say like butterflies or like symbols of like loved ones coming back to you, but for us, we say cardinals. Every

time we have a family event, there's always a whole bunch of bright, bright, bright red cardinals outside of the tree in front of my house. So, it kind of just like, I felt like my dad was there in this picture even though he wasn't.

Lisa also discussed spirituality in relation to her photo "...it makes me feel very, like it kind of reminds me that there's always someone watching over me, looking out for me." Elise was a little more explicit about seeing her loved one in the afterlife as a coping mechanism. Here is what Elise had to say "So, I thought I was going to – I was really okay with it because I made peace and I was like, "Oh, I am going to meet up with him in the afterlife." Ashley also mentioned the afterlife when discussing her photo to help her cope by stating "I kind of like I wish he was here. But yes, I know, he's [in] a better place."

Many of my participants discussed how spirituality and afterlife knowledge helped them cope with their loss. They did not explicitly mention using religion as a coping mechanism. However, Quinn and Elizabeth explicitly mentioned how their religious practice helped them cope with their respective losses. Quinn shared,

I'm a religious person. So there was this sense of peace of like – well, it's their time like they've had like 85 years. Like they've done, like their purpose they like from that religious aspect. But with my friend it was like you only got 18"

Elizabeth, who also said she was a religious person, explicitly discussed how she used religion and prayer to help her cope by stating,

Going to college, I almost kind of went through the whole, I cannot just go to the cemetery if I'm feeling upset, or I don't have like all these pictures of him[around] me. It was just very interesting. I did have that kind of there was a huge adjustment to live life trying to be, you know, I left because I wanted to be my own person. I left because I did

not want to be Jordan's little sister. And that is it. So, when I go there, of course, I think, "Wow, this time I'm going to live my life. This is what I'm going to do." But it never works out that way. And I did a lot more praying and talking to Jordan to help guide me to like to make a better life for myself."

Most of my participants mentioned keeping busy and spirituality as a coping mechanism for their grief. Religion and spirituality have been discussed in the grieving college student literature mostly as an identity that impacts how grieving students implement coping mechanisms (Hang-Hai et al., 2018). However, for most of my participants, some form of spirituality helped them process their grief and helped them move on.

Theme 4. "I know just how hard it can be and anything I can do to help": Participant's Reasons for Participating in the Study

Discussing grief can be a difficult experience for many people. Each participant discussed how grief had a tremendous impact on their first-year experience. The first thing that struck me was the consistency with which participants chose to join this study. Across the nine interviews, six participants explicitly stated that they chose to participate in this research study because they wanted to help other first-year students who struggled with grief the way they did. Helping others with similar experiences was the driving force behind the participation and success of this research. Alexis said it best when she said this about why she chose to participate:

I just – I've always been very passionate about trying to reach out to people that I feel like have similar experiences just to kind of be there for them, because I know just how hard it can be. And so, anything I can do to just kind of help with the research and help you with your doctoral stuff. And I don't know, just to kind of be there for people with similar experiences.

Elise echoed Alexis and said that she wanted to help out “I read her post and it was like weirdly specific from like, wow, like that like fits me. So, you know, might as well help out. So always love to help out in these kinds of things.” Like Elise and Alexis, Elizabeth also explicitly stated that she chose to help others with similar experiences. She had this to say about the study, “and I'd like to help anybody out, especially at something I'm so passionate about, which would be talking about my brother and helping others who went through similar experiences.”

Finally, Jason shared his decision to participate in the study,

Another person told me about it, and then I went through the same thing, so I felt a little connection there. Then also side note, I've had family members that go through Ph.D. programs, and getting people is very tough, so I felt the pain. You know college projects really like I can't get anybody, so I was like, “Yes.” I'll help it out.

While not explicit, like Elise, Alexis, Elizabeth, and Jason, Quinn, and Lisa alluded to helping others like them but were not as explicit. Lisa said this in relation to her chosen major:

My major is Human Development and Family Science. I want to be a child life specialist to help, like child life specialist, they get to, like children that are going to have to go through surgery, like have traumatic experiences. They're kind of like little therapists for the children. And I think that me wanting to do that definitely came from, like losing my dad, it help being able to help other children grieve and teach them how to cope and everything. It definitely came from that.

Quinn also alluded to wanting to help others by citing a conversation she had with her friend “But I really thought of you, I think you should do it. I think you could help people. And so, I was like, well look into it and I'll let you know. And so, I emailed you.”

Most of my participants chose to participate in this study because they wanted to help other college students who may have experienced something like themselves. While many of those same participants mentioned, they felt like they were alone in grief. This theme demonstrates a network of grieving students on college campuses that is eager to support each other during the grief process.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from my study on grieving first-year college students. I presented these through individual participant stories. I also presented some overarching themes that emerged across the nine interviews I conducted. The findings from this study revealed that each grieving first-year student's experience is unique. While the findings represented each student's uniqueness, they also demonstrated common experiences and themes that grieving first-year students may encounter. Most notable was the impact that peer and social interactions had on the grieving first-year student experience. Another notable aspect was the many ways that grieving first-year students experience and re-experience grief at various moments throughout their transition. Finally, most participants discussed a major way they coped with their grief was to keep busy through various organizations, clubs, or activities. In the next chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to previous literature and offer implications for future research and practice.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Grieving students represent a significant portion of the student body on college campuses (Cousins et al., 2017). While scholars have researched grieving college students, few have explicitly looked at grieving first-year students' transitional experiences (Balk, 2001; Cousins et al., 2017; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). This study aimed to better understand this experience and provide an asset-based approach to the research. This study will contribute to educators and higher education professionals' understanding of grieving first-year college students' experiences.

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of grieving first-year college students. To understand these experiences, I asked three broad research puzzles (1) Who are grieving college students, (2) How do first-year students experience and/or re-experience their grief during their first-year transition, and (3) What are the strategies grieving first-year students use during the transition to college? Through the stories of my participants, this study demonstrated the experiences of overlooked students. Traditionally research has discussed grieving college students from a deficit perspective. For example, grief literature primarily documents how grieving college students report isolation, loneliness, lower GPAs, and higher levels of psychosocial distress compared to their non-grieving peers (Balk, 2001; Cousins et al., 2017). However, after hearing my participants' stories and developing their narratives, I believe grieving students are resilient, determined, and compassionate. In this chapter, I explore how

these attributes are assets for grieving students as they navigated their transition to higher education.

In the previous chapter, I presented narrative stories from nine participants. I also presented the four common themes that I identified from across all the interviews. The themes included participants reasons for participating in the study, experiencing or re-experiencing grief, peer interactions, and coping mechanisms. Next, I will discuss my findings within the context of the literature and the theoretical frames in which I situated this study: transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) and the two-track bereavement model (Rubin, 1999). Finally, I will discuss implications for student affairs professionals as well as recommendations for future research.

Discussion of the Findings

My primary aim in this study was to understand the experiences of grieving college students. Although I did not set out to identify asset-based characteristic, it became clear through my participants' stories that they possessed multiple qualities that helped them navigate college following the death of their loved on. In this chapter, I will also highlight asset-based characteristics from my participants narratives.

Prior scholars stated that grieving students tend to have lower GPAs, have higher levels of psychosocial distress, and are more likely to report loneliness than their non-grieving peers (Balk, 2001; Cousins et al., 2017). While many of the participants discussed their struggles and reinforced some of these findings, I believe that grieving students are so much more than their struggles. My participants discussed overcoming grief and the negative impacts it can have on students. Only one of the participants was a first-year student at the time of the interview. I believe having participants further along in their college journey helped the study because

participants were able to reflect on and demonstrate how they struggled during their first year and articulate how they overcame those struggles.

Each of the participants demonstrated resiliency in the face of difficulty. Lucy was unique in that she chose a photo without her deceased loved one. However, her photo revealed how her family pulled together and bounced back after her father's death. Lucy also discussed the importance of her peer networks in helping transition to school. Lisa and Lucy were roommates; they both discussed how each other's support helped them transition to school. Lisa was also the farthest removed from her loved one's passing. However, she was clear when she said that losing a parent at such a young age made her motivated and independent.

In contrast to Lisa, Denise had the most recent experience. Denise's roommate passed away just six weeks before our interview. While still in the early stages of grief, Denise was determined to continue school and finish her first year. Quinn was like Denise and lost her best friend in the middle of her first year. While Quinn also struggled with academics during her second semester, she stated that her group of friends became stronger and more compassionate after their collective loss. Elise also lost her best friend/ ex-boyfriend during her first year. Elise also demonstrated, in the interview, grief characteristics that most resembled complicated grief, which impacted her experiences. Even though she struggled to connect with family, peers, and her former major, Elise still graduated and entered a master's program in the medical field.

Alexis discussed the emotional and financial hardship of losing a parent. While dealing with grief, she also had to navigate red tape around FAFSA. She also had to take on multiple jobs to pay for school, all while transitioning and grieving her mom. Ashley discussed her difficulties transitioning to college and grieving her loved one. Like my other participants, Ashley found support, worked on building connections, and processed her grief. Ashley and

Jason both discussed struggling with discussing their grief, especially during their first year. Through time Jason has been able to open up, discuss, and process his grief. While Jason and Ashley spoke on the struggles of not discussing their grief, Elizabeth discussed how her loss was always present in her life at home. Like the other participants, Elizabeth struggled to define who she was during her first year. She soon found support at her institution and thrived there.

It is worth noting that many of the struggles that my participants experienced, previous scholars have also discussed in the literature on grieving college students (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Particularly, Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) noted that grieving college students were at higher risk of dropping out of college than their non-grieving peers. Many of the participants who lost someone during their first year also struggled to maintain their academics. It is striking to note the differences in presentation between Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) and Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015). Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) discussed all the struggles of grieving college students through quantitative methods. However, similar to this present study, Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) approached their study using a qualitative narrative methodology. In their book, Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) discuss the struggles of grieving college students and how each student overcame those obstacles. This research reiterates Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum(2015) that even though grieving students may struggle with their academics they can also persevere.

This study also documented the struggles of grieving college students and had similar outcomes as earlier research (Balk, 2001; Palmer, 2016; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). However, like Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015), this research also documented how grieving students overcame their obstacles. By telling the stories of grieving students through a qualitative approach, it shifts the narrative of grieving college students. The participants' experiences in this

study underscored the importance of furthering research using qualitative methodology to understand grieving students. This shift in methodological paradigm may also shift viewing grieving students from a deficit approach to an asset-based approach.

Theme 1. Experiencing and/or Re-experiencing grief

Within this theme, participants discussed how they experienced and/or re-experienced grief throughout their first year. Similarly, to Rubin (1999) and the plethora of grief models my participants discussed how grief was an ongoing process and unique to them (Bowlby, 1982; Lamb, 1988; Shear & Mulhare, 2008; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This theme was characterized by two sub-themes, big moments and little moments. In most of these moments, my participants discussed feeling either sadness, depression, or anxiety. Rubin (1999), track two of his model stated that multiple dimensions occur throughout time instead of stages of grief. Each of my participants experienced these emotions throughout their first year what they referred to as both big and little moments. While Rubin(1999) and other grief researchers discuss how grief can come in waves over time, they do not discuss how big moment and little moments can cause individuals to re-experience grief (Lamb, 1998; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Big Moments. In grief models and literature, most research has documented that grief is not a straightforward process but a reoccurring act (Thai & Moore, 2018). Experiences of grief during big moments are “normal” aspects of the grieving process (Thai & Moore, 2018). Furthermore, grief literature on college students states that significant events such as a transition to college or graduation are moments that may trigger acute grief reactions (Palmer et al., 2016; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). This theme reaffirms the literature surrounding experiences of acute grief reactions during the first year of college.

Alexis explicitly stated that all of the big moments during her first year were hard such as Mother's Day, birthdays, and death anniversaries. Quinn, Elise, and Lucy also echoed this sentiment. Discussing the big moments and milestones as experiencing and/or re-experiencing grief is consistent with grief literature in general (Thai & Moore, 2018). For example, graduations, weddings, anniversaries, or birthdays may cause heightened reflection and the realization that their loved-one is not a part of their life any longer (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). Transitioning to college is also considered a big moment in college student grief literature (Palmer et al., 2016; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). However, this research specifically adds move-in weekend and orientation as a significant moment that college students may re-experience grief.

Schlossberg (1981) discussed how graduating from high school and starting college is a life transition. Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) also discussed how transitions can cause college students to re-experience grief. Furthermore, within first-year student literature, orientation serves as an important campus ritual that connect new students to the institution (Young, 1999). While the intent of move-in weekend and orientation may be to acculturate new students to the university, in this research it also presented itself as a life milestone for participants to re-experience grief. Of the participants who lost their loved ones before move-in weekend, Jason was the only one who did not mention this as a significant event. Lisa, Elizabeth, Alexis, and Lucy stated that they felt like they were missing something during move-in weekend. This research adds to grief and transition literature by adding move-in weekend to the list of major life events that may cause students to re-experience grief. Furthermore, this research also demonstrates that move-in weekend and orientation may isolate grieving students instead of welcoming them to their new community.

Small moments. Participants experiencing and re-experiencing grief during small moments is consistent with grief literature. Within grief literature, Rubin (1999) articulated that small moments can trigger acute responses to grief. Stroebe and Schut(1999) also discussed small moments by stating that people may face an intrusion of acute grief as they learn to manage and cope with their loss. Finally, as Palmer et al. (2016) stated, first-year students may experience sadness at various times throughout their first year.

Scholars have also discussed how grieving college students may experience grief during small moments. However, most scholars have discussed the experiences of college student grief through a quantitative lens (Balk, 2001; Cousins et al., 2017) (Palmer et al., 2016) (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). While they state that college students experience heightened anxiety, sadness, and depression, this research discussed these experiences and moments from a narrative approach. Furthermore, the present study also offers specific examples of small moments first-year college students may re-experience grief. For example, Lucy re-experienced grief during happy moments throughout her first year that she wanted to share with her father. Alexis also articulated that she experienced sadness every time she smelled something that reminded her of her mom's cooking. These moments and the many others shared by my participants demonstrate that grief does not just happen immediately after the loss or during significant college milestones. First-year college students can experience and/or re-experience their grief on any given day and educators need to be aware of this reality.

Theme 2. Peer Interactions

In the previous theme, the participants discussed how they reacted internally to big and little moments throughout the first year that caused them to re-experience grief. Within this theme I discuss how participants interacted with their peers. Both grief and transition literature

emphasize the importance of peers and support groups. From a theoretical standpoint, Schlossberg (1981) discussed the importance of support throughout a transition. In the context of first-year college transition, peer support groups become even more critical. Chaffin et al. (2019), Yazedjian et al., Ribera (2017), and Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2013) all noted the importance of creating social networks and connecting with peers during the transition to college. While positive social support is important for the first-year college transition, grief literature has noted peer interaction can negatively impact grieving first-year college students (Balk, 2001; Chaffin et al., 2019; Krumrei et al., 2013; Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). The findings in this research highlighted the importance of creating social support networks for first-year students. However, consistent with the grief literature the findings also suggested that peer interactions can have negative impacts on grieving first-year college students as well (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015).

Lack of Understanding From Others. Grieving college student literature has documented grieving students have higher rates of loneliness than their non-grieving peers (Cousins et al., 2017). Furthermore, researchers on grieving college students have also discussed the negative impacts of peer interactions. The findings in this theme underscore how peer interactions can have a negative effect on grieving college students. The lack of understanding from others can leave first-year students feeling isolated and separated from their peers. The lack of understanding from others can also cause grieving first-year students to have a more difficult time connecting with others and creating strong peer support networks.

The participants in this study explicitly stated how the lack of understanding of grief from their peers negatively impacted their first-year college transition and experience. Elise, for example, stated that people who have not experienced grief did not understand it, and Quinn

mentioned that her peers only interacted with her experience through tv shows and movies. Alexis, Lucy, and Elizabeth also discussed how they had difficulty interacting with peers because they lacked an understanding of grief and its impacts. For Lisa, this lack of understanding came from her mom, who had never lost a parent and did not understand that specific type of grief. Most of the participants discussed how their grief created some distance between themselves and their peers. Elizabeth, for example, stated that she felt like she did not connect with others because their problems seemed minor compared to her grief. Alexis and Elise also discussed how the lack of understanding from their peers led to loneliness and isolation.

While previous literature uses terms such as negative experiences and loneliness, I chose to label this experience as a lack of understanding. Later in this theme, I will discuss how my participants discussed building support networks of peers who were also grieving. I chose not to label this as loneliness because, as I will discuss, my participants found strong peer networks. Instead, my participants and I chose to understand these interactions as a lack of experience and understanding from their peers.

The Awkward Moment. I chose to separate this subtheme from the lack of understanding from others subtheme because of the uniqueness of the experience to my participants who had lost close family members. Furthermore, as a former grieving college student, “the awkward moment” experiences that my participants discussed reinforced my own experiences. Of my nine participants, four had lost a parent before coming to college. My participants discussed how mentioning that their parent was deceased caused awkward moments with their peers across each of these interviews. To my knowledge, grieving college student literature does not discuss this experience. However, each of my participants and many others in

the young dead parent's club can attest this awkward moment frequently occurs throughout college and young adulthood.

This subtheme discusses how minor interactions with peers can impact grieving college students. The participants who discussed the awkward moment reported feeling like they had made a mistake in the interaction. Even minor interactions can make grieving college students feel alienated from their peers. Student affairs educators should note that awkward interactions with their peers can negatively impact grieving college students at any time.

Peer Support. While peer interactions can cause grieving college students to experience loneliness and isolation, peer support can also have a positive impact (Palmer et al.2016; Servaty-Seib &Fajgenbaum,2015). Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) discussed that having a peer support group positively impacts grieving college student experiences on-campus. This peer support group gives students a voice and diminished loneliness by connecting them to the community (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum,2015). Palmer et al. (2016) also found evidence that having a peer support group helped young adults throughout the grieving process. However, there is some debate on the importance of peer support. Cousins et al. (2017) found that only familial support impacted grieving college students. The findings of this research support Palmer et al. (2016) and Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum (2015) that having strong peer connections has a positive impact throughout the first year of grieving college students. For example, both in this study and in Palmer et al. (2016) participants reported that creating peer support groups positively impacted their transition.

While the literature on grieving college students is mixed on the importance of a peer support group, the literature on first-year transitions is clear. According to much literature on first-year students developing a strong peer support network positively impacted first-year

students in various ways (Chaffin et al., 2019; Krumrei et al., 2013; Ribera et al., 2017; Yazedjian et al., 2007). For my participants, the interactions they had with their peers heavily influenced their experience as a first-year grieving student. Elizabeth, Ashley, Quinn, Alexis, Lisa, and Lucy all discussed how important finding a positive peer network was to their transition and their first year. On the other hand, Denise and Elise underscored how not having a positive peer support network can negatively impact the first year.

This finding fits with Servaty-Seib and Fajgenbaum's (2015) and Palmer et al.'s (2017) findings that having a peer support network can positively impact grieving college students. This finding also supports first-year student literature that has found the same (Chaffin et al., 2019; Krumrei et al., 2013; Ribera et al., 2017; Yazedjian et al., 2007). The findings in this study underscore the idea that having a strong peer support network can facilitate a better first-year experience and having negative peer interactions can facilitate an opposite experience. The type of peer support was mixed with the participants. For some, such as Elizabeth, creating a peer network of others that had gone through similar experiences was a key factor in assisting in her transition to college. However for others, like Alexis, having peers who would listen and be sympathetic was the important factor even if they did not have similar experiences.

Theme 3. Coping Mechanisms.

Various literature on grieving college students discussed how these students experience higher psychosocial distress rates, lower GPAs, loneliness, anxiety, and decreased belongingness than their non-grieving peers (Balk, 2011; Cousins et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2016). While this research did not seek to discuss grieving students from an asset-based approach it became clear the participants possessed adaptive qualities and coping mechanisms that helped them navigate

their transition to college. Because of this, I felt it important to discuss the coping mechanisms that participants employed.

Keeping Busy. A major coping mechanism that the participants employed was keeping themselves busy, so they did not dwell on their grief. Keeping busy is a consistent coping mechanism seen in grief literature (Lamb, 1988). Furthermore, keeping busy, is also mentioned in other coping mechanism literature (Nadal, et al., 2011). The findings in this study align with prior research that returning to daily activities and having distractions is a positive coping mechanism. As mentioned in chapter four, almost all my participants discussed keeping busy as a major coping mechanism for grief. Like Lucy, Alexis, Quinn, Jason, and Elizabeth, some of my participants all stated that they used student affairs activities such as Greek-lettered organizations to keep themselves busy throughout their first year. These participants mentioned that they could not focus entirely on their grief and gain connections on their campus by getting involved with clubs and activities. Many participants in this study chose to participate in extracurriculars as a method to cope with their grief. This finding suggests that student affairs professionals can play a vital role in helping grieving college students adjust to their new environment.

Grief literature also discussed how grieving college students tend to have lower GPAs during their grief loss semester than their non-grieving peers (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). While this was the case for some of my participants, like Quinn, it was also clearly not the case with Elise and Denise. These two participants stated that they have been focusing on their academics to cope with their grief. These two participants' stories underscore the importance of this research and the need to continue qualitative research among grieving college students. By

understanding individual stories, we can see that grieving students have unique experiences and cannot be labeled from a deficit perspective.

Spirituality. Some of my participants also stated that they used spirituality to help them cope with their grief. I intentionally chose to label this subtheme as spirituality because some of my participants discussed organized religion while others did not. Some scholars have discussed grieving college students and spirituality development. Hang-Hai et al. (2018) discussed how Christian students implemented coping mechanisms around grief. For many Christian students, their religiosity provided spiritual support and a connection to the deceased. Balk et al. (2011) also discussed how grief could impact religiosity during young adulthood. Grief could alter college students' approach to their religion and cause them to see spirituality more positively or negatively.

The participants in this study reiterated Hang-Hai (2018) and actively used spirituality as a coping mechanism. For example, Elizabeth and Quinn both stated that participating in their religion and religious practices helped them cope with their grief. Spirituality was not just based on the religiosity of my participants. Lucy, Elise, and Lisa referenced the afterlife when discussing how they coped with death and grief. Each of the participants discussed how their spirituality helped them process and understand their loss. This theme underscores the importance of spirituality with grieving college students. Having a strong positive connection to their loved-one and being able to connect with them through their spiritual beliefs helped the participants cope with their grief.

Theme 4. Reasons for Participating in the Study

At the outset of this study, I did not seek to understand why grieving students would want to participate in my research. This is evidenced by the fact that I even forgot to ask this question

during my first interview with Lucy. However, as I asked this question to each subsequent participant, a pattern began to emerge. Each of these participants wanted to help other college students who had similar experiences as them.

While the reason for choosing to participate in this study was not specifically regarding their first-year experience and their transition, I would be remised not to include this in my themes and my discussion. This theme struck me because it spoke to the heart of why I chose this topic for my study. Across all the interviews, the consensus was clear. Grieving students want to be there for other students like them.

While grief literature discusses the positive influence of peer and family support during the grieving process, there is little discussion on how students who have passed acute grief reactions wanted to help others like them (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015). This theme suggests that students who have experienced grief while in college in the past are now willing and eager to help other students. I will discuss this theme further in my implications for the practice section.

Implications for Practice

This research adds to the literature on the grieving college student experience. By explicitly focusing on the first-year college student experience, in this research I discussed the unique experiences that grieving students might have during their transition. This research demonstrates that grief is unique to each individual and that making broad conclusions about grieving college students should be avoided. This research is particularly important because it uses a qualitative narrative approach, whereas most available research on grieving college students has primarily used quantitative methods. While it was not my intent to create a master narrative of the first-year grieving college student experience, several experiences appeared

across the interviews. These commonalities can be used by student affairs educators to begin to understand some of the key issues that grieving first-year college students may face.

Stories not Statistics

Student affairs educators and researchers should reconsider the use of quantitative research when discussing grieving college students. While many of my participants discussed similar experiences to the literature, these experiences were not universal. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that each student's grieving experiences are unique to the individual. Continuing to primarily use a quantitative methodology to understand grieving students will continue to overlook the individual students' experience. Not considering individual stories of grieving students may cause student affairs educators to miss the opportunity to assist a population of students struggling on their campus.

This research suggests that student affairs educators should consider individual stories when working with students and creating policy. Prior research has documented the importance of having student bereavement policies in place (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019). However, in practice, institutions may create a uniform bereavement policy for all students. Bereavement leave for students may not give students sufficient time and flexibility to grieve in their way. Denise's experience is a prime example of how current bereavement policies may not be sufficient for all students. Denise's institution gave her bereavement leave to attend her roommate's funeral and time to move rooms. While her faculty were understanding and adjusted her deadlines for the first week after her roommate's passing by the six-week mark Denise perceived them as less understanding. From Denise's perspective, she needed more than a few days of bereavement leave and a week to catch up to continue to feel on track with her academics. Therefore, institutions need to work with individuals to establish a bereavement

policy that works for them and their situation. Consistent with the literature, some of my participants reported struggling with academics during their “death-loss” semester. Liberal bereavement policies may go a long way in helping all of our students be successful.

Through the stories of grieving first-year college students, this research also discussed the experience of grief during move-in weekend. While prior research documents that grief is heightened during transition and major life events, these stories gave a voice to a specific event when grieving students may experience and/or re-experience grief. I suggest student affairs practitioners consider these experiences when thinking about move-in weekend. Student affairs practitioners could also consider partnering with the student care and outreach offices at their institutions to develop resources for grieving first-year students during move-in. Resources could include access to the counseling center, grief support groups, or connecting them with other first-year grieving students. While student affairs practitioners may not mitigate the grief that students may experience during move-in and orientation weekend, they should consider ways to support these students.

Peer Support

This research also discussed the role that peer support has on the grieving first-year college student experience. The participants in this study who had strong peer support discussed the importance that supports played in their transition. However, the participants who did not have support also discussed how the lack of support added to their struggles. This research also documented the lack of understanding of grief by non-grieving students. The role of peer interactions offers perspectives that student affairs educators need to consider. Student affairs educators could consider conducting trainings for student leaders to understand grieving college students.

This research underscores the need for institutions to establish grief support groups. These support groups could offer grieving students the outlet they need to process their grief with other students with similar experiences. Additionally, as the first theme suggests, many of my participants were passionate about helping other grieving college students. Furthermore, almost all my participants were upperclassmen. These findings reveal that upper-class students were willing and passionate about helping other grieving college students. Student affairs educators could use this study's findings to implement a peer mentor program for grieving first-year college students. Having upper-level students help first-year students transition to school and discuss their experiences may give new students the peer support they need to succeed.

Lisa and Lucy's experience demonstrated the positive impact of having a roommate who has experienced grief on the first-year student transition. Both participants discussed how they relied on each other to find support throughout their first year. Based on their experience, I would encourage housing and residence life departments to consider experiences with grief when matching roommates. The findings in this study suggest these roommate pairings can positively affect student transition during the first year.

These findings also suggest that student affairs educators need to heavily publicize and advocate for any bereavement policies or initiatives implemented. While many institutions offer bereavement support groups, my participants articulated that they did not know they existed. Furthermore, many of the participants found other grieving students by participating in clubs and organizations. Perhaps student affairs administrators in student activities, housing and residence life, and Greek Life could partner with student care office or counseling center to connect grieving students from across campus. Campus admissions or new student programs could include optional questions about grief or other areas of concern for incoming students. Students

could be connected to resources based on their responses. Grieving students may go under the radar, and student affairs educators may miss their struggles. However, these findings suggest that it is imperative for student affairs and higher education institutions to do outreach and create policies that benefit grieving students.

Recommendations from the Participants

To conclude each interview, I asked participants what they wanted their institution to know about their experience. In this final section of recommendations for higher education and student affairs educators, I believe they should listen directly to my participants.

Various participants stated that they wished that their institution knew how much they were struggling and how much they needed the institution to provide them resources. The participants also noted that they wished that their institution had specific resources specifically for grieving students. For example, while Jason and Elise said they utilized the counseling resources at their various institution, they found them lacking for their needs. Both Jason and Elise said that they wished the counseling center had better resources for students experiencing grief. Both expressed that their counseling center handled students who were in greater crisis. However, because they were not in immediate physical danger, they found their interaction with their counseling center did not support their needs. Therefore, grieving college students may benefit from counseling centers that have specific resources for grief. Student affairs educators may also consider grief support groups that provide resources to grieving students when counseling centers lack resources. Jason and Elise's experience with the counseling center is also consistent with other grieving college student literature. Balk (2001) stated that grieving students might not visit the counseling center or get the resources they need because grieving students do not view their grief as a mental health issue.

Both Lucy and Alexis had recommendations for student affairs educators. Lucy suggested that institutions create a guide for grieving first-year students. Alexis had a similar recommendation and argued for a “dead parents club” that acted as a support group for students who had recently lost parents. Both Lucy and Alexis struggled with financial aid because they lost their parents shortly before starting school. Institutions and student affairs educators could create a FAFSA guide for students who had parental income change suddenly within the last year due to a death. Student affairs educators could also specifically create a resource guide for grieving first-year students. Finally, a grieving student club that connects students and raises awareness for on-campus grief resources may benefit.

Quinn and Elizabeth offered suggestions for academic affairs. Quinn was struggling in her courses after she lost her friend during her first year. She mentioned that her faculty was able to offer her resources because they noticed a change in behavior from the fall to the spring semesters. Quinn suggested that there should be more proactive resources for grieving students who are struggling with academics. She found that most of the resources were reactive to help her get back on track. However, she suggested a notification or tracking system where students could get academic resources before they begin to struggle after experiencing a loss. Elizabeth also suggested academic affairs. She suggested that academic advisors better understand grieving student experiences and how that may impact academics. She also suggested that if academic advisors knew more about incoming students, they could offer resources or tailor class schedules to meet grieving student needs.

While many of the participants offered suggestions for their institutions to do better, Quinn and Ashley offered praise for their institutions. Denise, for example, stated that she was grateful for her institution. Her residence life department was swift in moving her from the room

her roommate passed away. The university community also offered numerous resources, and the whole community reached out to her to offer their support. While Denise received a community of support because her roommate passed away at the school, Ashley also had nothing but good things to say about her institution. She said that everyone she spoke with offered care and support. As soon as she told her coach she was struggling; she received all the resources available at the institution that she needed.

Ashley and Denise's stories suggest that institutions can provide resources that grieving students need to succeed. A major difference between Denise and Ashley and other participants is that they were connected to the resources they specifically needed at their institutions. These two anecdotes suggest that if higher education institutions expand their resources, they will meet the needs of grieving first-year college students and help them successfully transition to college.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, I presented nine stories of grieving first-year college students. The strengths and limitations of this study offer numerous avenues for future research. In this section, I offer several recommendations for future research on the experiences of grieving college students.

In this study, I situated the first-year grieving college student experience using a narrative inquiry approach. This study, therefore, yielded helpful information in understanding the possible experiences of first-year grieving students. However, more research should be done to understand their experiences. Furthermore, most literature on grieving students has been done from a quantitative approach. I urge future researchers to consider grieving students as individuals with unique experiences. More qualitative research could be done on college students with different grief experiences. For example, the participants in this study who lost parents or lost friends seemed to have a more similar experience. Studying how college students grieve

these specific losses may provide a more nuanced understanding of the grieving college student experience. This research also solely focused on grief and the transition to college. However, this is not the only transition experience that college students experience throughout their higher education.

A prime example is college graduation. A few of my participants discussed how their impending graduation had heightened their grief during their senior year. Studying transition the experiences of grieving college students during graduation will also add nuance to the grieving college student experience.

This study also focused on undergraduate college students. Prior grief scholars have discussed how grief impacts the undergraduate college experience (Balk, 2001) (Thai & Moore, 2018). Throughout participant recruitment, I had several graduate students offer to participate. Several of these graduate students had lost a family member or friend during their graduate studies. While a significant loss can occur during graduate studies, the vast majority of the literature is focused primarily on undergraduate students. The impact of grief on graduate studies is an understudied and important topic explored in future research.

I situated this study to understand the experiences of first-year students. While I did not recruit participants based on gender, age, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, many of my participants identified as white and female. Furthermore, my research focused primarily on the transition to higher education. However, Denise and Ashley offered insight into various research projects that future grief researchers could explore. For example, Denise mentioned that her roommate identified as a lesbian did not come out to her parents. Studies could explore the grief experiences of LGBTQ+ college students who are grieving the loss of a partner that was not

out to a significant number of their family and friends. Studying these experiences could add to the literature on disenfranchised college student grief.

Ashley also briefly mentioned how her identities as a Black woman impacted her grief experience. While this was not the focus of the study, she mentioned that she felt that grief was rarely spoken about in her family because they identified as Black. Further research should explore the experiences of grief among Black college students. Furthermore, this study did not interview any Latinx, Indigenous, or Asian-American college students. Exploring how various college students across cultures and racial identities experience grief will significantly add to the understanding of grief in the student affairs literature.

Finally, this research took place within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, none of the participants experienced a loss due to complications caused by the virus COVID-19. I would urge future studies to look at grief among college students who lost someone because of the pandemic. Future studies should also look at the collective grief of college students throughout the pandemic. Finally, this study focused on first-year college students. Almost all of my participants experienced a full or almost full academic year, and they described their college experience as “normal.” However, Denise experienced her first year during the COVID-19 pandemic and an anything but “normal” experience. She mentioned that because of the pandemic, she was not very connected to the community. I would urge researchers to look at how the pandemic has impacted college students, particularly first-year students. Particularly I would suggest that future research investigates first-year student belonging during the pandemic and during the fall of 2021, where it is anticipated that we will be post-pandemic. Gaining an understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted our first-year students will help guide student affairs professionals for years to come.

Conclusion

This study centered the stories of nine grieving first-year college students. These stories underscored the understanding that grief is unique to each person that experiences it. This study's findings provide insight into who grieving first-year students are, how first-year students may experience grief, and how first-year students may navigate their transition. The findings also provide insight into how student affairs educators may approach and work with grieving first-year college students.

While this study's findings focused on the uniqueness of first-year grieving students, the findings also presented some common themes. Participants discussed the big moments and the little moments during their transition where they experienced or re-experienced grief. Participants also discussed the role of peer interactions influenced their transition. While participants noted a lack of understanding from their peers, they also discussed finding their support group, particularly among other grieving or struggling students. Finally, participants discussed various coping mechanisms that they utilized to navigate their first-year transitions.

Student affairs educators can consider the findings when working with first-year grieving students or developing bereavement policies. Student affairs educators should continue to remember that each grieving student is unique in their experience, and they should treat each student they encounter with care and compassion. Student affairs educators can use these findings to consider developing peer support groups, mentorship groups, or student networking opportunities. Furthermore, while student affairs educators should continue to support first-year grieving students, the findings implore them to consider the resiliency and strength of these students. From a scholarship perspective, more research should be done using qualitative

methodology. Future scholarship should also consider how various social identities impact grieving college students.

I came into this research from my own experiences with grief at a young age. Like Lisa, my dad's passing has completely impacted who I am as a person today. I aimed to showcase the various experiences of grieving first-year students and the potential struggles in their transition to college. However, through this research, I also showed the strength of my nine participants. As the full impact of COVID-19 continues to be explored, I believe that research on grieving college students will become ever more prevalent. This research demonstrates that whether you lost someone six weeks ago, fourteen years ago, or thirty years ago, the grief never entirely goes away. Furthermore, as this research demonstrated, grief can impact you during major milestone moments or while walking down the street or listening to music.

This research is a call to student affairs educators to understand and appreciate the uniqueness and individuality of each student's story. This research serves as a reminder that grief lasts and becomes an integral aspect of our identity. Student affairs educators should remember or learn that grief is something that our students may struggle silently with even if they present as a good student and an engaged student leader. Finally, this research calls student affairs educators to support grieving students, offer them resources, and not leave them to deal with their loss alone.

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Appendix A

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Email

Dear Student,

My name is Ryan Terry, and I am a researcher from the University of Georgia College of Education, collecting data about how grieving students experience their first-year at a college or university. This study involves individual interviews and a photo discussion with grieving first-year students across the country. This study has been approved by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board.

I am inviting you to participate in an interview process that will last approximately 90 minutes. During this interview, I will ask you to tell me about your transition to college, how you have experienced grief during your transition, and strategies you have utilized during your transition. You are also invited to share with me any significant photos that you feel connected to as part of your grieving process. Due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and the national scale of this research project, interviews will take place over a password protected Zoom link.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose to leave at any point. Our conversations will be audio recorded and transcribed for later analysis, and potential use in published research articles. Your name will not be included in any published work; however, I may include direct quotations from the interview.

For the purpose of this research, your name and any identifying information will only be accessible to the researchers, including myself and my faculty advisor at the University of Georgia.

Learning about your experiences will allow institutions to consider how grief impacts the transition to college. There are no known risks associated with this research. You will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card for participating in this interview.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Ryan Terry
College of Education; The University of Georgia

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Ryan Terry at ryan.terry@uga.edu. Questions about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

Social Media Post



**HAVE YOU
LOST
SOMEONE
CLOSE TO YOU?**

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS?
This research study is on the grieving first-year college student experience

-  Participants who have lost an immediate family member or close friend before or during their first year are eligible for this study.
-  The research study will consist of one 1 hour interview with potential follow-up. Participants will be asked to provide a relevant photo and discuss
-  \$20 amazon gift card for participants
-  Approved by the University of Georgia Mary Frances Early College of Education. Potential risks include loss of confidentiality, and the subject matter of the research means that some participants might find participation evokes strong feelings

To participate, contact doctoral candidate Ryan Terry
ryan.terry@uga.edu



 **Mary Frances Early
College of Education**
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT LETTER Grief and First-Year Transition

Dear Participant,

My name is Ryan Terry, and I am a student in the Counseling & Human Development Services Department at the University of Georgia under the supervision of Dr. Georgianna Martin. I am inviting you to take part in a research study.

The purpose of this research proposal is to understand the experiences of first-year grieving college students. This study will focus on college students who have lost a close friend or family member before or during their first year. Grieving first-year students may experience the transition to college or university differently than their non-grieving peers. The guiding research questions are broadly: How do first-year students experience or re-experience their grief during their first-year transition? What are the strategies that grieving first-year students use to transition to college?

You are being asked to participate because you have self-identified as grieving college student who lost an immediate family member or close friend before or during your first year. I am looking to understand your experiences as a first-year college student while also grieving the loss of your loved one.

Your participation in this study will primarily be an interview process that will last approximately 90 minutes. During the interview, I will first ask you to present and describe a photo that holds meaning for you and your loved one. I will then ask you to tell me about how grief has impacted your experience transition to college. Finally, I will ask questions regarding strategies that you have employed to assist in your transition. You will also be invited to share key moments, emotions, and support that you have received throughout your transition to college. The interview process will take place primarily via Zoom a video conference application. After the interview process you will be contacted for clarification or follow-up during the data analysis phase. Your participation in this study will formally conclude after December 15th, 2021.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact in your participation in *academic or co-curricular* programs.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research, though participants may feel uncomfortable during the interview while discussing their experiences with grief and their transition to college. To minimize risk, the researcher will offer open disclosure at the outset to

make participants aware of the nature of the study. If needed, the researcher will follow up with any participants who express discomfort to refer resources.

Study participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card and the completion of the interview is not required to receive the incentive. The email address collected to distribute the Amazon gift card will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team. Other than the Amazon gift card we do not anticipate any direct benefits to participants from participating in this study. However, learning about your experiences will help institutions consider the experiences of grieving first-year students. Grief can be a major aspect in a first-year students transition to college. Therefore, it is critical for student affairs educators and college administrators to understand the experience of grieving first-year students. Furthermore, this research will attempt to give voice to grieving first-year students from an asset-based approach.

Data collected will include information that identifies you indirectly via the use of a pseudonym. Data will be used and stored on the researcher's computer. The researcher is the only individual with access to the information. The institution and participants will not be identified in any dissemination of results. Research records will be labeled with study IDs that are linked to you by a separate list that includes your name. This list will be destroyed once we have finished collecting information from all participants. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

The information obtained will only be used for this study and will not be used for any additional research in the future.

If you are interested in participating or have questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at ryan.terry@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Ryan Terry

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Grief and First-Year Transition to College

This interview will last approximately 90 minutes, and with your consent will be recorded for the purpose of transcription and eventually analysis. You may terminate the interview at any time throughout the process. This interview will be about the experiences of first-year grieving college students and their transition to their university. This interview will consist of photovoice and a description of your photo along with ten interview questions.

I will first begin the interview by building rapport. Prior to the interview, I will select a photo of importance to me related to grief. I will begin the interview by introducing myself, my research interests, and why I chose to study grieving first-year college students. I will then show my photo to my participants and describe why that photo is important to me.

After discussing my positionality to the research I will begin interviewing the student.

1. Tell me about yourself and why you chose to participate in this study?
 - a. Where are you from?
 - b. What is your major/ what college do you attend?
 - c. Why did you choose the college you are at?
 - d. How would you describe yourself?
2. Can you describe the photo you have chosen to share with me today?
 - a. Why is this photo meaningful to you?
 - b. What sorts of emotions and feelings does this photo bring up for you?
 - c. What would you want the world to know about this photo/ your loved one?
3. Describe for me your first semester in college transition?
 - a. How did your loved one feel about you attending college/ going to the college you chose?
 - b. What was move-in weekend like for you.
 - c. How did you feel about moving into college without your loved one?
 - d. Have you felt like you have reexperienced grief since moving to college?
4. How has grief impacted your first semester of college?
 - a. Are there times or events that impact you more than others?
 - b. What has been the most difficult aspect of your first semester?
 - c. Have there been highlights?
5. Describe your support systems
 - a. How has your support system changed since the passing of your loved ones?
 - b. How has that support system changed since coming to college?
 - c. Have you been able to develop a support system during your first semester?

- i. How has that support system impacted (or lack of) your experience in college thus far?
6. When you have experienced acute reactions to grief (sadness, anxiety, depression, etc.) how have you manage those emotions?
 - a. How has managing your emotions changed since coming to college?
7. We are now past winter break. How was returning home from your first semester?
 - a. What emotions came-up for you?
 - b. What was it like reintegrating back into your family environment?
 - c. How did you navigate this experience?
 - d. What was coming back to campus like for you after winter break?
8. What are some challenges that you have faced during your first year?
 - a. How has grief played an impact on these challenges
 - b. How have you navigated these challenges?
9. As a grieving student, what are some strategies that you have used to navigate your first year?
 - a. How have these strategies changed over time?
10. As a grieving first-year student what would you like your institution to know about your experience?