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EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS WHO LEAD INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO A STUDENT DEATH BY SUICIDE

A Chapter Style Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership

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EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS WHO LEAD

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO A STUDENT DEATH BY SUICIDE

By Kate Demerse

We recommend acceptance of this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership.

The candidate has completed the oral defense of the dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

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This phenomenological study was designed to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to student death by suicide. Although there is extensive research to advise higher education professionals in suicide prevention and postvention, there is little existing research to support and guide the professionals asked to navigate the aftermath when a student dies by suicide. Purposive sampling was conducted to yield five participants who engaged in two semi-structured interviews to share their experiences. Participants also shared their institution's student death protocols for additional data analysis. The research was grounded in Kolb's theory of experiential learning and the concept of secondary trauma. Findings indicated that participants experience a strong focus on the families of the deceased students, the experience is all-consuming, and they simultaneously navigate many groups of people as they execute the student death protocols. Recommendations for higher education include appropriate authority, additional supports, and better protective measures for responding professionals.

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To Edison. You're my favorite. Stay wild, goofy, and kind.

Finally, to all the students lost to suicide and the families I have worked with—I carry you with me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As professionals spend an increasing amount of their time at work, it is only natural that situations at work can have a significant personal impact (Sever & Ozdemir, 2022). I can think of no professional circumstance in my career more profound than losing a student to suicide in the spring of 2021. Soon after local authorities contacted the student's parents, I made the call to them as the university representative. Regardless of my years of training, nothing had prepared me for the level of pain in his father's voice. I felt the same level of shock and helplessness communicating with the student's roommates, who had discovered him.

Reflecting back on that two-week span, I remember life in terms of feelings and emotions as opposed to actions and decisions. I felt helpless but was provided guidance on my next steps by the university's processes. It was my job to follow our student death protocols, ensure the campus was appropriately notified, and that impacted folks were supported to our best capacity. I look back on my notes from that time frame and they are a jumble of lists, mainly focused upon taking on tasks on behalf of the bereaved family and friends. Because this was our campus's first student death by suicide in recent memory, I also worked very closely with our counseling center director to determine appropriate campus messaging and support options, to avoid sensationalizing and contagion concerns.

I have never felt more professionally driven to do the right thing. At the end of those hectic weeks, I remember thinking a few things: nothing in my training prepared me for this situation, did I do right by the student's family, and how do I just transition back into my regular job duties? Those same thoughts circle in my head, even years later.

This chapter begins with a background of the topic and context from which the study emerged. Following this, the chapter outlines the statement of problem and statement of purpose. Additionally, research questions provide a framework for the study. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the study's rationale and significance, positionality, definitions of key terminology used throughout this dissertation, and limitations and delimitations.

Statement of the Problem

In higher education, there is significant prevention and postvention work focused on students, and rightfully so, specific to suicidality (Higher Education Mental Health Alliance, 2014; Streufert, 2004; Wrenn, 1991). Having experienced the death of a student by suicide, I can attest to the impact this has on the student affairs professional who leads the institutional response. At the time of my first student death by suicide, I had been a student affairs professional for 13 years and a dean of students for three years. In my career, I had experienced student deaths, campus tornadoes, fires, investigated sexual violence, and other personally and professionally impactful things. Walking up to the building, in the earliest moments of the event, prior to even the coroner being on the scene, I knew this would be the most difficult event of my career. From the moment I received the call from our campus police to the moment I closed the case file, I was on high alert.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, it became my job to maintain communication with deceased student's family, the roommates, the residence life staff, the faculty, and more. Throughout the response, I understood the need to appropriately balance authentic emotion with professionalism. While standard case management processes were occurring, the university was also concerned that we had not "missed" something about the student, so I needed to be working to investigate this information. Adding a layer of complexity to this particular student death, this student died during the first full academic year of the Covid-19 pandemic. When my division came together for a meeting over Zoom, I sat in silence, unable to fully articulate the experience and sense of loss for our campus.

I now know that what I was experiencing was secondary trauma. Defined as "stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (Figley, 1999, p. 10, as cited in Lynch & Glass, 2019), secondary trauma can manifest in many ways, including sleeplessness, avoidance, and more. In a separate, more recent student death by suicide, my office learned of the death when the police report, in graphic, unredacted full detail, was shared. In this case, the shocking details of the death created a sense of isolation for my staff, as we are not permitted to share police reports. Each situation provided complexities and nuances that must be treated with care.

Because there is not a national clearinghouse to collect statistics on college student death by suicide, it is difficult to determine the scope on a college campus. The Senior Director of Student Success and Wellbeing John Achter at the Universities of Wisconsin indicated, "I get asked the question about the number of suicides across the system every so often, and believe it or not, we do not collect this data" (J. Achter,

personal communication, October 13, 2023). Data collected from a study within the Big Ten universities from 2009-2018 reported an overall suicide rate of 5.60 per 100,000 students in that nine year period (Scherer & Leshner, 2021), which is less than the national average and down 25.3% from the prior decade. Complicating the accuracy of available data, Bakst et al. (2016) found that death by suicide is often misclassified, "or erroneously registered as deaths of 'unknown causes' and 'undetermined intent'" (p. 119).

Anecdotally, I know of at least two Universities of Wisconsin campuses that had lost students to suicide in the first six weeks of the Fall 2023 semester. Unthinkably, one campus experienced three student deaths by suicide in that timeframe, triggering the convention of their emergency operations center for the first time since the Covid-19 pandemic. The Universities of Wisconsin responded by bringing in colleagues from across the system, as well as crisis counselors for faculty, staff, and students to assist in the aftermath. A presentation on this situation was given at the December 2023 Board of Regents Senior Student Affairs Officers meeting to provide best practices, including distribution of the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance's resource entitled *Postvention: A Guide for Response to Suicide on College Campuses* (2014). Death by suicide significantly impacts college campuses as evidenced by the robust responses and guidelines to support students.

It is not uncommon for student affairs professionals to be involved in the aftermath of a student death by suicide. A recent thread of the National Association for Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment (NABITA) listserv asked members to share their student death protocols. Of the institutions who responded, all had protocols

which placed a student affairs professional as the representative to lead the institutional response to a student death by suicide. This general sentiment is mirrored when I searched other professional listservs, blogs, and Reddit. Although not the purpose of this study, there are countless others impacted by a student death by suicide: fellow students, faculty, residence life staff, university police, and others. Its impact can be felt broadly within the university community.

I wanted to know if this phenomenon had been studied. Did others in my position share these experiences? I knew this would not be the last time I would experience a student death by suicide. Are there things I could draw upon to ensure I am prepared, responding well, and then taking care of myself afterwards? I found little information to guide professionals in my role, specifically when searching for standards of best practices (Cusick, 2008). I sought to understand the experiences of other student affairs professionals who lead the institutional response to a student death by suicide. Through the understanding of this phenomenon, perhaps I can draw out some commonalities to share this experience more broadly.

As I reflected on the student death by suicide in spring 2021, I saw the experience in very distinct buckets: how was I, or could I, have been prepared for the death of a student by suicide? What skills and abilities did I possess that best assisted me in managing the situation? What self-care and aftercare was most impactful following the situation? I structured my study around these questions. What goes into preparing professionals who assist the families, students, faculty, and staff after experiencing a student death by suicide? What skills, knowledge, and abilities would have been useful in my experience?

I originally wanted to create a study to inform the practice of leading after a student death by suicide, with the intent to develop a framework and process to guide practitioners through this work. After digging into the literature on the topic, I decided to "walk before I ran" and wanted to begin by telling the important and compelling stories of the practitioners who do this critical work. There is clear guidance on how to create strong postvention for campuses and for students (Higher Education Mental Health Alliance, 2014; Streufert, 2004). The mental health clinicians providing frontline care to students on campus have professional training in self-care, boundaries, coping strategies, and more. However, such guidance may not exist for the non-clinical professionals whose responsibility it is to tend to the faculty, staff, students, and families who are grieving. I wanted to conduct research that explored practitioners' experiences to help improve postvention support for practitioners. What are practitioners' experiences with and understanding of self-care and aftercare?

Existing training and guidance as well as research on the effects of a death by suicide on the student affairs professionals who guide a campus through this event does not exist on a broad scope. Practitioners' experiences and their responses may be life changing. This study aimed to illustrate the stories of those given this role, to shine a light on this heavy responsibility.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide in higher education.

The specific research questions include:

1. How do student affairs professionals describe their experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide?
2. How, if at all, do student affairs professionals experience secondary trauma associated with student death by suicide?
3. How do student affairs professionals make meaning of this experience?

Significance and Rationale

This study is significant because higher education is losing students to suicide at an increasing (Walpole et al., 2023) and alarming rate. In 2020, death by suicide was the third leading cause of death in ages 15-24, preceded by unintended injuries and homicide (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], (n.d.-a). The national mental health advocacy organization Active Minds (n.d.) lists suicide as the second leading cause of death among young adults. In the aftermath of a student death by suicide, student affairs professionals are asked to lead the institutional response, providing direction, comfort, and closure to grieving campuses. While the field of student affairs originated as a helping profession, few could foresee professionals untrained as clinicians or bereavement specialists taking on such specialized roles.

Guiding a campus through the aftermath of a student death by suicide can cause personal and professional stress for the student affairs professional leading the response. Velez-Cruz and Holstun (2022) discuss the concept of compassion fatigue on student affairs professionals. Compassion fatigue, as defined by Figley (1995), is the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes in professionals working with trauma sufferers. Compassion fatigue "may lead to negative approaches toward others and a growing feeling of work-related dissatisfaction" (Velez-Cruz & Holstun, 2022, p. 119). Significant

to this study, Conrad and Kellar-Guenther (2006) found that compassion fatigue can develop from feeling empathy for someone suffering from a psychological trauma, even if the contact is brief. Research indicates that unaddressed symptoms of compassion fatigue may increase an educator's risk of burnout (Velez-Cruz & Holstun, 2022). Burnout is defined by Mistretta and DuBois as the accumulation of chronic stress caused by overwhelming work responsibilities (2021, p. 140).

Recent data from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources Higher Education Employee Retention Survey indicates 33% of higher education employees are very likely or likely to look for new employment opportunities in the next year (Bischel et al., 2023). This research is corroborated by data from a NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2022) report entitled *The Compass Report: Charting the Future of Student Affairs*, which found about one-third of respondents said they were not sure they would stay in the field for the next five years. Respondents in this survey cited "level of stress and crisis management responsiveness required for the role, which may lead to burnout" as the second highest factor that could contribute to their decision to leave the field (p. 23).

Could some of this attrition and burnout be avoided if the phenomenon of managing a student death by suicide is better understood? Could we better prepare our professionals if we had an enhanced understanding of the experiences of those who have walked this journey of supporting bereaved families and campuses? I believe it is the stories of the professionals who have experienced this phenomenon that will be most valuable to the field of student affairs. A qualitative, phenomenological study into the

experiences of the student affairs professionals who had led their institutional enabled me to probe the deep, rich, often emotional stories.

When embarking on this study, I had hoped that participants in this study would share valuable insight into their experiences leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide, thereby providing other professionals an understanding of this phenomenon, how to best prepare themselves, and ways to assure appropriate aftercare. This awareness may lead to more effective institutional processes, thereby retaining these important student affairs professionals.

Researcher Positionality

Qualitative and phenomenological research inextricably links the researcher and the participants; however, to ensure trustworthy research, it is important to also reflect upon any bias brought by the researcher. In my case, the topics of death by suicide, its relationship to mental health, and the institutional response to a student death are deeply personal issues. I did not stumble upon this topic nor am I a passive observer of the phenomenon. Before moving forward, I want to take a moment to discuss my own positionality in respect to this research.

In this research, I interviewed folks who have experienced a phenomenon that I have also experienced in my position as the dean of students. I have served as the dean of students at a regional Midwest public institution for over five years. In that time, I have overseen the institutional response to approximately a dozen student deaths. It was one particular student death by suicide, in the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic, that drew me to better understand this phenomenon. Perhaps it was the specific situation, the sense of isolation enhanced by the pandemic, but I remember feeling alone in my obligations and

feelings. I knew there were other professionals in the field who had similar experiences, and the national data provided information to suggest this was becoming a more common experience. Given this, I wanted to explore this to find similarities in our shared experiences. I also was also conscious that others may respond differently and kept the mindset that no response from participants was wrong in this research.

There is complexity to being a suicide survivor, or someone who has lost a significant other to suicide (Hanschmidt et al., 2016). As a researcher, I will be careful not to project my experiences onto research participants and yet my experiences provide some understanding to the path of the survivors I work with. Grief occurs in many forms but in the case of a suicide survivor, research suggests there can be stigma and guilt associated with the grieving process (Evans & Abrahamson, 2020). Conversely, other literature has found that the experience of suicide bereavement is similar to those grieving other types of loss (Hanschmidt et al., 2016). This diverse research demonstrates the range of the grieving process and its unique space for each death.

I have also walked my own mental health journey. Throughout college and my master's program, I struggled with depression. I was fortunate to come from a family where mental health was embraced, discussed, and encouraged. Just as important, I also had the financial means to access treatment, allowing me to seek counseling and medication for my concerns. My experience with counseling contributed to me having a positive mindset toward clinical responses to stress, trauma, and grief. Suicide was not a path I considered but I acknowledge its link to depression and mental health. I also acknowledge that suicide can be a controversial topic, with connotations of taboo and

shame. While this study will not shy away from the difficult nature of this topic, I will take particular care not to portray death by suicide in a controversial or negative light.

A relatively new, and key, aspect of my social identity is that I am a mother. In May of 2020, I gave birth to my son. The first student death I experienced following his birth was a student death by suicide in the spring of 2021 and I experienced it differently as a parent. Being a mom is the most important part of my life, and I cannot imagine the death of my child. For the first time, I felt a stronger sense of obligation to the deceased student's family than I did to the institution I worked for. Even more so, I reacted to the student death as a parent myself and needed to check my reaction, ensuring I was not projecting that identity to the student's parents. Not all families have the relationship I grew up in or that I have with my son, a familial privilege I need to acknowledge in this work. As a researcher, I will take care not to project my feelings toward the value of family onto the participants.

Another identity important to this research is my connection to the Universities of Wisconsin and the network of support offered by this relationship. I have found the experience of leading the institutional response to a student death by suicide to be isolating on my campus. There is incredible stress, grief, and emotions associated with the event. In my experience, colleagues from sister institutions often reach out, offer support, and "show up" for me in supportive and kind ways. Their similar experiences with this phenomenon, operating within a state university system, lessen the sense of isolation. Not all participants in my study may have that network of support. I suspect that, for some, this study may be the first time they are speaking with a student affairs professional with a similar experience. I will not assume participants have a support

network in how I frame my interview questions. Further, I will craft questions with care, convey an open demeanor, leave space for silence, and allow participants to speak freely for as long as they need to.

In qualitative research, we are asked to think about how we "show up" (Bloomberg, 2023) in our work and research. My identities as a parent and employee with a state university system, as well as experiences with mental health struggles and suicide bereavement are important to acknowledge. I recognize and account for them throughout this study in part by using a journal to account for my perspectives and potential influences as recommended with the hermeneutic process. Understanding differing perspectives on this topic is the reason I chose to further study the phenomenon of student affairs professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions clarify how terms and concepts are used in relation to this research:

- A *death by suicide* is defined as "death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die" (CDC, n.d.-b, Suicide is a Leading Cause of Death section).
- *Suicide prevention* is a comprehensive approach to identify and mitigate risk (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2020).
- *Postvention* is defined as "activities developed by, with, or for suicide survivors, in order to facilitate recovery after suicide and prevent adverse outcomes including suicidal behavior" (Andriessen et al., 2017, p. 43).

- In this study, the concepts of *training* and *preparation* encompass both formal and informal mechanisms, which could include conference attendance or personal experience with the topic.
- *Self-care* or *after care* is defined as "the engagement in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that maintain and promote physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing" (Ovie, 2020).

Limitations and Delimitations

While all studies have limitations, there are unique considerations to the limitations of a qualitative phenomenological study. Limitations are potential challenges to the research, which may weaken the study and the authenticity of the results (Bloomberg, 2023). Death by suicide remains a taboo and stigmatized topic. It is unknown how this stigmatization may have impacted the work of participants and their experiences in leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

I have previously acknowledged a personal connection to the topic of death by suicide. I assumed a reflexive stance while dissertating to ensure continuous reflection on my own experiences. I remained in close contact with my chair and committee, as well as my personal support network, during this research process. I utilized journaling to ensure I appropriately separated my own experiences from the rich stories shared by research participants.

A delimitation, or decision I made to purposefully narrow the scope of the study, was to focus on participants outside of my professional network. Based upon my experience with this phenomenon, I knew I was asking participants to share stories of a deeply personal, often traumatic professional experience. I did not want our professional

relationship to blur the lines of this study or compel participants to tell anything but their unfiltered truth. Thus, I chose to limit participants to those outside of the Universities of Wisconsin. Lastly, I scoped the study to only professionals who have led the institutional response, wanting to hear the stories of those most impacted by this phenomenon.

Structure of Dissertation

In the following chapter, I provide a review of the literature relative to the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide in higher education. Then in Chapter III, I will present the methodology used to conduct this study. Chapter IV will synthesize the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter V will discuss the study's outcomes and provide recommendations for further research and higher education practice.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Student death by suicide is an unfortunate reality on college campuses in the United States. In 2020, death by suicide was the third leading cause of death in ages 15-24, preceded by unintended injuries and homicide (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], n.d.-a). The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) maintains statistics on homicides and suicides of youths ages 5–18 at school. Colleges and universities that receive federal funds are required to report incidents of criminal homicide on campus owned, campus controlled, or campus adjacent properties. However, an initial review of other reporting requirements does not find additional requirements for the reporting of other types of student deaths. Therefore, it is difficult to gain a clear picture of the breadth of this issue of death by suicide specific to college campuses.

The impact of college student death by suicide is a well-studied topic. Journals of mental and behavioral health, as well as death studies and student affairs, have explored this subject to better understand this growing epidemic (Walpole et al., 2023). A review of the scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles and books, reveals that most research about suicide is geared towards preventative efforts and education for student affairs professionals to assist a campus through a grief process following a death. National organizations such as the Jed Foundation and the National Institute for Mental Health provide additional information and resources, some specific to higher education. However, existing training and guidance as well as research on the effects of a death by

suicide on the student affairs professionals who respond is less prevalent (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Cusick, 2008; Norton, 2017). Given college student suicide statistics, it is imperative that student affairs professionals who respond to a student death by suicide have the skillset, tools, and support to do this job well and with care.

I began this literature review by researching key phrases through the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse library website. I searched for articles that included combinations of the following words: "suicide," "college," "university," "student affairs," "response," "secondary trauma," "aftercare," and "protocols." I limited my review to peer-reviewed journal, books, and dissertations. As I reviewed the literature, I grouped it into categories: suicide response, aftercare, and training. These categories helped shape the direction of this chapter.

This chapter provides a review of the literature relative to the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide in higher education. To gain a deeper understanding of this topic, the chapter begins with an overview of suicide on college campuses. Because there is little research about the experiences of the professionals who lead the response to a student death by suicide within higher education literature, this literature review borrows from the white papers of professional organizations and relies upon work from disciplines such as death and grief studies, counseling, and public health.

The review of literature is organized into three areas. The first area focuses on the availability of training or preparatory work for student affairs professionals to prepare them to respond to a student death by suicide. The second section focuses on useful knowledge, skills, and abilities for student affairs professionals who respond to a student

death by suicide. The third section explores the available self-care and aftercare to student affairs professionals who led the institutional response to a student death by suicide. Following the discussion of relevant topical literature, the chapter concludes with highlighting the theoretical and conceptual framework used for this study: Kolb's experiential learning theory and the concept of secondary trauma.

Literature Review

The CDC (n.d.-b) defined death by suicide as "death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die" (Suicide is a Leading Cause of Death section). College student death by suicide is a well-researched issue in higher education. Two areas within suicidality are particularly well researched: suicide prevention and postvention. Suicide prevention, a comprehensive approach to identify and mitigate risk (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2020) and postvention, systemic support that provides assistance to survivors who are grieving the death of a student (Streufert, 2004), are researched from the angle of providing support and resources to the postsecondary population.

Scholars have found suicidal ideation to be an important precursor to later attempts or completed suicides (Berman, 2022). Suicidal ideation, according to Arria et al. (2009), "includes having thoughts of killing oneself, even if one would not carry them out, or having the desire to kill oneself" (p. 234). In their qualitative study of approximately 1,200 first-year college students, Arria et al. (2009) found that approximately six percent of first-year students experience suicidal ideations. Indicators of these ideations included depressive symptoms, low social support, and affective dysregulation.

Suicide risk is not equal for all students. In a five-year quantitative study of first-year college students at Pace University in New York City, researchers asked students to complete a survey about their suicidal thoughts and attempts (Shadick et al., 2015). Researchers compared this data to student demographics and identities, such as sexual orientation and minority status. College students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) were found to be at higher risk than their heterosexual peers (Shadick et al., 2015). Students of color who identified as LGB were also at an elevated risk of suicide compared to their non-LGB peers.

Interestingly, the rate of completed suicides is lower in college students than their non-student peers. Analyzing 14 years of quantitative data from counseling center directors, Schwartz (2006) found the suicide rate for college students to be about half the rate as non-students in the same age bracket. A factor in this disparity in statistics could be the resources available to college students. Many college campuses have counseling centers, health centers, and other resources, often available at a discount or for no cost. These resources appeared useful in assisting students experiencing crisis and reducing the rate of suicide on college campuses (Schwartz, 2006). This difference was particularly interesting when further exploration into the age demographic reveals the college years present a period of increased vulnerability for mental health challenges, including the onset of common psychiatric conditions. Said another way, though college students experience suicide at a lower rate than non-college going peers, the age at when adults typically attend college is a period of increased vulnerability. College students reported high levels of stress, suicidal ideation, sleep concerns, loneliness, and family isolation (Arria et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2018).

The research is nuanced but clear: college student death by suicide is a cause for concern for campus administrators. College campuses are putting an increasing number of resources toward prevention and postvention work. However, in the aftermath of a student death by suicide, the institution must act quickly to provide a competent, compassionate response. The next section explores the training needed to ensure the professionals leading this response are prepared.

Underdeveloped Training for Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs is "hard work and heart work" (Wright, 2020, p. 78), a career with implications for student growth and lifelong learning. When a student dies, a campus community is left to grieve the loss, and a university must determine an appropriate way to respond. Unlike some functional areas within higher education, moving a grieving family and campus through the loss of a student to death by suicide is not a linear nor a well-understood process (Cusick, 2008). Many college campuses appoint a member of their student affairs staff to represent the university in these situations, often the dean of students or an equivalent position (Cusick, 2008; Wrenn, 1991). The following section explores themes found in the literature regarding the preparation for these professionals to manage student death by suicide.

Lack of Standards and Training

Within higher education and student affairs, practitioners look to the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) for excellence and benchmarks for achievement. In the critical area of student death and campus grief, CAS and other national organizations such as College Student Educators International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) are relatively silent on

providing professional guidance. ACPA and NASPA (2015) released a joint document entitled *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (American College Personnel Association & Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015), with ten suggested competency areas, including personal and ethical foundations, organizational and human resource, social justice and inclusion, and technology. The document lacks specific information about managing student death and crisis. In May 2023, CAS released updated standards specific to higher education and student affairs professional programs. This document is intended to "provide criteria by which an academic program of professional preparation can judge its educational efforts" (CAS, 2012, p. 349, as cited in Young & Dean, 2015); however, it does little to share practical information to prepare student affairs professionals for crisis.

Overall, there is a general lack of training and best practices available to student affairs professionals who lead campus responses to student death by suicide (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Cusick, 2008; Norton, 2017). The literature on the subject guides practitioners to create student death protocols, discusses helpful personality characteristics when responding to a student death, and emphasizes crafting a campus communication plan (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Hamilton, 2008; Wrenn, 1991). However, this heavy emphasis on policy and postvention fails to consider the impact the lack of preparation has on the professionals who are asked to represent the university in these times of crisis. Leading an institution through a student death by suicide requires "a rapid, consistent, coordinate, accountable, and accurate response at a time of intense emotional demand" (Cusick, 2008, p. 552).

A death by suicide also adds a layer of complexity to any student death, which requires care (Chapple et al., 2015). For this reason, the Survivors of Suicide Loss Task Force (2015) reasoned that "the bereaved deserve a consistent response and first responders who are well trained, knowledgeable, and compassionate in their approach to new survivors" (p. 29). One scholar put forward recommendations for student affairs programs to include curriculum "with scholarly insight on the effect of student death when working in higher education" (Wright, 2020, p. 84). Another corroborates this by stating, "If counselors and student affairs administrators are to respond effectively to death, graduate programs need to evaluate the amount of grief training in their current curriculum" (Streufert, 2004, p. 167).

Instincts

In the absence of formal training, an interesting theme arose in the scholarly literature: reliance on professional instincts. Siegel (1985) asserted that "much of what we do in reacting to death does not come from a special set of skills" (p. 105). Working with the bereaved requires empathy, kindness, and respect. Cintrón et al. (2007) affirms this and adds that student death polices should also reflect the campus mission and culture. This requires the responding professionals to be adaptable. Streufert (2004) offered, "Besides adequate training and support, [professionals] must also possess certain characteristics…how to be flexible, creative, and quick thinking" (p. 168). Wrenn (1991) elaborated on this concept and asserted, "More often than not, the sensitivity of the people involved and their experience in solid human relations is what makes things work well" (p. 402).

Perhaps some of these skills of empathy and kindness are learned through training in other areas of student affairs and higher education. For example, live-in residential life positions are entry-level positions for both student staff and new student affairs professionals. Staff in these positions may experience working long hours, working with serious mental and behavioral health concerns, and being the first professional on the scene upon the death of a student. As such, residential life staff participate in "training programs, which increase perceptions of preparedness, self-efficacy, and knowledge" (Walpole et al., 2023, p. 3).

The path to a senior student affairs officer or similarly situated position responsible for responding to a student death by suicide, is varied. Some practitioners have educational backgrounds in psychology at the master's or doctoral level which provide additional training that may prove useful during a response. Similarly, student affairs professionals may receive crisis training through other avenues, such as the university's emergency management team, behavioral intervention team, or threat assessment program. Tangential trainings can be called upon by professionals when responding to a student death by suicide.

Training and Support for Others

Student affairs professionals who lead the institutional response to a student death by suicide are not just asked to represent the institution, they often are also asked to train faculty, staff, and students on policies and procedures related to student death, despite their own lack of formal training. Some literature has recommended regular training to the campus community (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008), with one researcher calling for "death response drills" (Streufert, 2004). However, using qualitative narrative inquiry to

interview the responding institutional administrators at a public Canadian institution who had experienced the murders of a group of students, Ovie (2020) found that these additional responsibilities can add significant emotional stress to student affairs professionals.

Student affairs professionals who lead the institutional response to a student death by suicide are often also asked to support surviving members of the campus community, without formal training on how to do this (Zinner, 1987). Streufert (2004) has suggested maintaining consistent contact with the deceased student's family and coordinating a campus memorial. Additional tasks may include organizing support through the counseling center on campus or assisting with funeral arrangements (Cintrón et al., 2007). This work is done to assist a grieving campus, but the responding professional may not have comparable support to personally assist them through the crisis.

Postvention is Prevention

Despite the extensive research indicating a lack of preparatory information to prepare student affairs practitioners to respond to a student death by suicide, significant research asserts that postvention work should be planned out in advance of a crisis. The Higher Education Mental Health Alliance (2014) emphasized:

> Postvention planning should ideally be done in advance and be specific enough to be useful, while flexible enough to apply to different circumstances. This pre-crisis planning is important because in the aftermath of a campus suicide, when emotions and tensions are high, it is very difficult to respond without having guidelines or plans in place. (p. 6)

Notably the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance recognizes high emotions and challenges in suicide response yet has limited materials to prepare professionals for this emotionally taxing work. Implied is that professionals need to plan but not be trained.

The work to support survivors who are grieving the death of a student may also prevent suicide contagion, which is defined as an increase in suicidal behaviors resulting from exposure to attempted or completed suicides (Walling, 2021). Postvention, with the goal of providing healthy coping techniques, may also have a positive impact on retaining students to the university (Streufert, 2004). Effective postvention work has found that "their experiences of support and of learning prior to and after the event shape their processes of living with the experience" (Causer et al., 2019, p. 3292).

Student affairs professionals who are asked to lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide are given a heavy task, generally with little training and preparation to ensure their readiness for such a task. To compound this, they are also asked to train their campus in relevant student death policies and procedures, coordinate support for bereaved members of a campus community, and extend care to a grieving family (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Norton, 2017). Without proper training, this can seem like an insurmountable task.

Skills, Knowledge, and Abilities to Respond

There is a lack of firsthand accounts in the scholarly literature that speak to what skills, knowledge, and abilities student affairs professionals wish they would have had when responding to a student death by suicide. In the absence of direct narratives and best practices, a few themes emerged. The research spoke to the importance of attention to cultural differences, conducting an academic autopsy, and shared responsibility.

Cultural Differences

Just as each student who steps onto a college campus is slightly different from the next and should be treated as such, a college student death policy should be sensitive to cultural differences (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). Although local laws will take precedence, it is important to consider cultural mourning and burial practices. Like Taub and Servaty-Seib's (2008) findings, Cintrón et al., 2007 asserted:

> Just as no two people grieve the same, different cultures maintain unique mourning practices. Notions of death, dying, belief in an afterlife, funerary processes, and bereavement vary widely among ethnic and religious communities. Within the United States there is considerable diversity in grieving habits. "Appropriate" mourning is both individually expressed and culturally sanctioned. (p. 42–43)

These considerations are particularly important for student affairs professionals when responding to a student death by suicide, as there may be additional cultural implications due to this manner of death (Streufert, 2004).

For a grieving campus, some may turn to their spirituality for comfort and answers in the wake of a death by suicide. At a public institution, this can be a delicate balance for leaders to strike, as stated by Wesener et al. (2010):

> The line between church and state becomes difficult to determine under the stress of a crisis. Caution and intentionality should be exercised regarding if, when, and how religious references are made. Institutions must make a choice about whether to use religious symbols, and if so, from which faith communities. It is also important to note that those who do not have religious affiliations or who feel

> alienated by certain faith traditions may be offended by the use of particular symbols and references. (p. 124-125)

Institutional leaders must make important decisions, often unique to each student death, about the way to best honor the student and their life. This can include incorporating faith-based ceremonies and imagery and cultural grieving practices, even on a secular campus.

Important to this conversation is cultural perceptions of suicide. College campuses are becoming increasing culturally and ethnically diverse, seeing a 7% increase in international students in 2023-24 (Nash, 2024) and the share of student of color enrollment increasing from 32.2 percent to 49.9 percent between 1999-2000 and 2012-2020 (Kim et al., 2024). With this diversity in student population comes a diversity in attitudes, perspectives, and responses to suicide. For example, some societies have a positive view of suicide that is done for culturally approved reasons; in Japan, if one shames one's family, suicide can be an act of honor (Lester & Colucci, 2013). However, Muslims see suicide as an unforgivable act. Administrators should take care to remember cultural context when responding to a student death by suicide given the added complexity.

Academic Autopsy

An academic autopsy is "a term used by death educators to describe the evaluation of the actions taken subsequent to a particular death or crisis" (Zinner, 1987, p. 501). It is best practice to take time to review each student death experience, usually a few months after the event (Hamilton, 2008; Zinner, 1987). A similar approach can be taken to study the actions prior to a death or crisis. This is called a psychological autopsy

and typically includes a clinical perspective (Stanley et al., 2009). In a case study of 20 United Kingdom student suicides, Stanley et al. (2009) conducted a modified psychological autopsy to explore the perspectives of survivors. Stanley et al. (2009) found three themes in their research: (a) risk factors such as mental health concerns, substance abuse, or previous suicidal behavior, (b) changing relationships in the higher education environment, and (c) factors specific to academic life such as academic progress and transition periods during the academic year. College student suicide rates have risen over 30% in the last two decades (Walpole et al., 2023), thus conducting an academic autopsy allows the university to not only evaluate its actions, but importantly, adjust its approaches to processes (Zinner, 1985) to ensure continuous improvement for the sake of survivors.

Both Wrenn (1991) and Streufert (2004) asserted academic autopsies are the responsibility of campus death response teams. Death response teams, also known as crisis response teams, are multidisciplinary teams utilized to "plan a response to assist grieving family, faculty, students, and community" (Streufert, 2004, p. 153). The functions of the team are to provide campus and family notification, postvention strategies, training, and documentation. The team structure allows for a collaborative approach to the difficult task of managing a student death by suicide.

Shared Responsibility

The focus of this research and literature review is to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead the institutional response to a student death by suicide. However, the literature demonstrated a shared approach is both appropriate, and, at times, required. Cintrón et al. (2007) recommended preparing for student death by

collaborating with local officials, "including learning the roles of each governmental level and gaining familiarity with their roles before, during, and after an event involving the death of a student" (p. 22). For example, if the suicide occurred on campus property, the responding university professional would share or perhaps abdicate next of kin notification responsibilities to a law enforcement officer (Cintrón et al., 2007). Additionally, the coroner would maintain legal control of the body and the police would take possession of a suicide note as part of their investigation (Norton, 2017). A non-clinical student affairs professional can and should rely heavily on the staff in the university's counseling center to provide mental health support to the impacted students (Arksey & Greidanus, 2022). All formal and external communications should be routed through the university's communications department to ensure clarity and continuity of messaging (Callahan & Fox, 2008). A shared approach to the initial response is appropriate to ensure the university community and the deceased are being treated with dignity during a time of heightened distress.

The death of a student by suicide should be treated with care and each circumstance should be reviewed for its unique circumstances (Streufert, 2004). The emotional weight and number of processes involved in processing a student death should not be underestimated. Relying on the collaborative nature of student affairs and higher education can assist the point person or team coordinator in ensuring all protocols are being followed and communications remain effective in the aftermath of a student death (Wrenn, 1991).

Aftercare

While each institution has its own way of processing the death of a student, incomplete information is known about how institutions support the student affairs administrators who carry out these policies and procedures (Ovie, 2020). Halberg (1986) explains, "The death of a student is one of the most difficult and painful experiences that student affairs administrators can undergo in their institutions" (p. 412). The concept of self-care is promoted but ill-defined and rarely mandated. Personal self-care can be complemented and supported with institutional backing. To address the impact of professional trauma, including student death, scholars have suggested that professionals engaged in self-care (Ovie, 2020).

Self-Care

Self-care is the "engagement in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that maintain and promote physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing" (Ovie, 2020, p. 52). The literature on self-care is vast, with earlier iterations taking a simplistic approach and suggesting professionals "take good physical and mental care of themselves" (Hamilton, 2008). More recent literature has expanded on the notion and provides a more nuanced approach, stating "[self-care] can look different for each person and not every person may have a clear picture of what this means to them…self-care can be a term used to actually make you work harder and take on more trauma" (Squire et al., 2021, p. 177). Emotional labor associated with prioritizing self-care may include negotiating personal boundaries and conversations about self-advocacy (Lynch & Klima, 2020). Without the necessary associated skills, it can be burdensome to take on this additional labor as a precursor to

self-care. Additional forms of self-care may take the form of personal time off, counseling, an employee assistance program, or other work modifications.

Student affairs has a complicated history with the concept of self-care. Isdell and Wolf-Wendel (2021) explain "Student affairs has historically favored those who can prioritize job duties over personal responsibilities, particularly regarding the need for availability during the traditional workday and after-hours response" (p. 16). Velez-Cruz and Holstun (2022) confirm and add this was only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when significant disruptions to the academic and social environment had an impact on mental health. Davis (2019) argued that the act of self-care allows student affairs professionals to avoid compassion fatigue, also known as the cost of caring. Regardless of the way a student affairs professional takes on their self-care, they need institutional support to do so.

Institutional Support

Institutional leaders in a crisis may be chosen because they are skilled at managing the crisis and taking care of others. They may not always be skilled or attentive at taking care of themselves or their own mental health (Ovie, 2020). This is where the support and intervention of supervisors or senior administration play a critical role. Ovie (2020) argues "When leaders are given support for their self-care and mental health after traumatic events, they are better prepared to handle the next crisis" (p. 62).

The responding professional's supervisor may control for factors both internal and external to the crisis, including mandating campus-wide trainings, pushing financial resources to assist with the situation, and relieving them of their regular responsibilities. Additionally, a supervisor can provide personal support throughout to ensure the

responding professional does not burn out while managing a student death by suicide. Streufert (2004) indicated, “Part of grief training in graduate programs should also include strategies on how to avoid compassion fatigue” (p. 167). Symptoms of compassion fatigue include feeling emotionally numb, forgetful, and over-reactive to minor events, as well as feeling exhausted and distressed because of responding to the crisis. In the absence of grief training, a supervisor can help to mitigate the risk of compassion fatigue.

In my review of literature on institutional support, I also found climate to be a critical component. Wright (2020) argued there are narrow-minded assumptions and perceptions of who personifies student affairs professionals, many of which are rooted in whiteness. Wright further explored the need for sentience, the capacity to experience emotions and feelings. In her doctoral dissertation, utilizing a workshop format with participants who were clinicians who had lost a client to suicide, Duval (2020), found that a responding professional from a marginalized identity may feel disenfranchised if they do not feel supported by a system that has historically excluded them. Ovie’s (2020) study on the mental health and self-care of leaders who responded to the murder of a college student recommended that an institution should allow the responding professional the space to experience the death and resulting emotions authentically. The studies from Ovie (2020) and Duval (2020) corroborate Wright’s (2020) hypothesis that professionals in a supportive role also need the space and opportunity to experience emotions and grief in a healing way.

To serve as the institutional representative to a grieving family and campus community is a significant responsibility, one which deserves a corresponding level of

support for the student affairs professional given the task. Universities have developed postvention plans to support impacted student populations in the aftermath of a student death by suicide but there is a gap in the research to suggest little has been done to create support for professionals beyond employee assistance programs. With student affairs professionals citing burnout and compassion fatigue as an impact of their work (Lynch & Glass, 2020), it is imperative that more robust self-care and professional support programs are developed to support student affairs professionals, specifically those tasked with implementing student death protocols.

Summary

Death by suicide is the third leading cause of death is college-aged students. When a college student dies, the institution must respond in a way which honors the student and brings closure to the campus. In many instances, this process is led by a student affairs professional. The current body of literature on this topic focuses on suicide prevention and postvention but provides very little insight into how to guide a campus professional through the mechanics of the process. Additionally, there is a significant gap in the literature about the experiences of the professionals asked to coordinate the aftermath of a student death by suicide. The following section will outline the theoretical and conceptual framework used for this study, David Kolb's experiential learning theory and the concept of secondary trauma.

Theoretical Framework

After exploring the relevant topical literature specific to college student death by suicide, it is important to situate this topic within a theoretical framework. I utilize Kolb's theory of experiential learning to explore modes of learning, specifically firsthand

learning and doing after observing (Duval, 2020) and how this relates to implementing skills and policies without formal training. I also explore the concept of secondary trauma and its impact on student affairs professionals.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

Kolb (1981) developed the theory of experiential learning, positing that learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Kolb described the theory of experiential learning as one of adult development, making it an appropriate theoretical foundation for this research. He placed significant emphasis on the role of experiential learning in the learning process. Further, according to Kolb, individuals learn differently (Killam & Degges-White, 2017), a core tenet of constructivist theory. Kolb's described learning as a four-stage cycle: *concrete experience* (CE), a feeling dimension; *reflective observation* (RO), a watching dimension; *abstract conceptualization* (AC), a thinking dimension; and *active experimentation* (AE), a doing dimension (Evans et al., 2010). In other words, the learner experiences, reflects, thinks, and then acts again. Each stage relies upon successful navigation of the foundational stage before it.

Kolb (1981) layered complexity into the theory, stating the learning stages require abilities to achieve. To master concrete experiences and abstract conceptualization, one must be skilled at taking in information. To master reflective observation and active experimentation, one must be skilled at processing information and making meaning. As preferences for the processes emerged, so did four learning styles: accommodators, divergers, convergers, and assimilators. In 1999, Kolb changed the style names to

converging, diverging, assimilating, and accommodating to demonstrate their style is not static and learning can change (Evans et al., 2010).

Kolb's theory holds special significance within academia and graduate preparation areas that rely heavily on experiential learning. Kolb sought to build upon Jean Piaget's constructivist learning theory, which asserted that knowledge is the product of provided information, past experiences, cultural background, and personal experiences (Kolb, 1981). Like the concepts of the constructivist learning theory, the curriculum within student affairs master's and doctoral programs serves to prepare practitioners for careers in student conduct, residence life, career services, student activities, academic advising, and more. It is meant to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework from which practitioners build the parts, as is the tenets of a constructivist paradigm (Bada, 2015).

The theory of experiential learning expounds that learning occurs in any setting and continues throughout an individual's life (Evans et al., 2010), and constructivist theorists argue the human mind constructs knowledge (Chuang, 2021). This theory serves as framework for professionals who lead an institutional response to student death by suicide, as these are situations when professionals are being asked evaluate situations, make decisions, and apply results in real time. Examples include calling next of kin, meeting with bereaved families, and conducting academic autopsies.

The scholarly literature has demonstrated a lack of training for professionals who lead the institutional response to a student death by suicide. While this does not indicate there is not a need for some preparation, Kolb's experiential learning theory points to the

notion that generalist preparation that may provide adequate foundation to then allow for practitioners to learn as they experience critical situations.

Secondary Trauma

Student affairs is a field of helpers—professionals trained to guide, coach, and advise students through their college years (Squire et al., 2021). With the increased rate of mental health challenges among college students, student affairs professionals are increasingly being placed in roles to respond to student crises, putting them at greater risk for secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is defined as "stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (Figley, 1999, p. 10, as cited in Lynch & Glass, 2019) and is recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-V) as a qualification for post-traumatic stress disorder. Secondary trauma can result from responding to the increase in mental health crises, sexual violence, or hate/bias incidents.

Lynch and Glass (2019) developed the Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale to study the pervasiveness and severity of symptoms of secondary trauma that student affairs professionals may experience when exposed to student crises. This 29-item instrument was developed based on categories in previously validated instruments such as the Negative Alternation to Mood or Cognition (NAM) and the Secondary Trauma Self-Efficacy Scale. The instrument asked student affairs professionals about types of trauma supported, frequency of support, secondary trauma, and stress. Once the instrument was validated by a panel of nine experts, it was distributed nationwide to senior student affairs officers, with a participation rate of 617. Lynch and Glass's (2019) research found 87% of respondents reported supporting

students through trauma at least a few times a year, with 12.2% indicating a few days a week. Respondents indicated they supported the students through situations such as severe mental health concerns, the death of a loved one, and suicidal ideation, attempt, or completion. These incidents of support manifested in symptoms of sleeplessness, interacting less with family and friends, avoidance, and others.

In 2023, Lynch published additional research to build upon his initial work on secondary trauma in student affairs professionals. Lynch (2023) found:

> Within the context of helping professions, including student affairs, experiencing negative personal impacts from traumatic stress are not only harmful to the professional but can severely damage their ability to provide support to those they seek to help. If [student affairs professionals] are experiencing symptoms such as dualistic thinking, lack of creativity, irritability, lack of empathy, and avoidance, they are not in an ideal mental space to provide the best support for their students. (p. 294)

Lynch's research is compelling as higher education seeks to retain quality students and professionals and yields practical implications for administrators and human resources.

Squire et al. (2021) asserted that most graduate programs do not prepare student affairs professionals with skills to identify symptoms of secondary traumatic stress in themselves. Lynch and Glass (2019) concurred, adding this lack of preparation extends to identifying factors which mitigate the negative effects of exposure to student traumas. Hence, these researchers suggest that practitioners should have tangible tools to help themselves determine whether they are experiencing secondary trauma. Glass's tool provides practitioners with tangible assessments to determine the impact of the crisis, as

well as potential mechanisms for intervention by supervisors, such as an instrument to identify trauma.

Summary

Kolb's theory of experiential learning and the concept of secondary trauma are the underpinnings of this study. Combined with a constructivist paradigm, the theory of experiential learning asserts that people learn by experiencing and doing. The literature has demonstrated a lack of formalized training in leading an institution through a student death by suicide. Accordingly, practitioners are asked to learn and lead as they experience the phenomenon. Further, the concept of secondary trauma has implications woven throughout the literature, as student affairs professionals seek to navigate their own emotions and reactions during the student death response.

Conclusion

Death is a fact of life, and a college campus is not exempt from this reality. In 2020, there were approximately 6,062 deaths by suicide by college-aged students in the United States (CDC, n.d.-a). Student affairs professionals asked to lead the institutional response to these untimely deaths are given the task of responding with care, grace, and empathy. However, more can be done to ensure professionals and institutions are prepared for such an event. The Survivors of Suicide Loss Task Force (2015) stated: "The time to develop a coordinated response to an event such as suicide is before it happens, so that key leaders in the group will be trained and feel prepared to respond in a way that is helpful and reassuring to every affected by the death" (p. 25).

Kolb's theory of experiential learning demonstrates adult learners fall into separate and distinct types of learners, but overall asserts learning happens in any setting

and persists throughout one's life. The process of experiencing and leading a student death by suicide, with minimal training, is most certainly an opportunity for learning. This theory, coupled with the impact of secondary trauma, will ground the research of this study.

With the foundation of empirical literature on the topic of student death by suicide and theoretical framework focused on learning and trauma, this research explored the experiences of student affairs professionals who are asked to represent the university when a student dies by suicide. Have these professionals been trained and thus prepared to carry out this task? What skills and knowledge do they wish they would have had when faced with this experience? And noting the powerful impact of secondary trauma, what aftercare is important to the professionals who work with those impacted by a student death by suicide? Student affairs places great emphasis on caring for students, and rightfully so. However, "as much as higher education embraces the whole student, it also needs to embrace the whole individual that is doing the work to serve and empower student" (Wright, 2020, p. 83). Appropriate training, skills, and reinforcement to bolster self-care for student affairs professionals will demonstrate this level of support.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of student affairs practitioners who have led an institutional response to a student death by suicide. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do student affairs professionals describe their experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide?
2. How, if at all, do student affairs professionals experience secondary trauma associated with student death by suicide?
3. How do student affairs professionals make meaning of this experience?

This chapter describes the research methods, with attention to the following areas: (a) paradigm of inquiry, (b) methodology, (c) research design, (d) methods, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis, (e) and standards of rigor. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Paradigm of Inquiry

A paradigm of inquiry is a worldview, a set of beliefs that influence a person's actions. Just as each of us experiences the world uniquely, creating our own truth from our experiences, each practitioner will experience the phenomenon of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide differently. This research is anchored within the constructivist and interpretivist inquiry paradigms. Constructivism adopts the idea that reality is subjective and distinct to the participant. It rejects notions of the

positivist paradigm, which asserts that truth is universal (Jones et al., 2013). Rather, truth is unique to the individual and claims of knowledge are unique to the person making the claim. Pascale (2011) further asserts that a constructivist believes "knowledge and meaning are always partial, conditional, and perspectival--therefore there is no possibility of timeless and universal knowledge" (p. 50).

The constructivism paradigm was developed by Jean Piaget and contends that knowledge is the product of provided information, past experiences, cultural background, and personal experiences (Kolb, 1981). Within the constructivist paradigm, constructing knowledge about leading the institutional response to a student death by suicide is done through learning about behaviors, interactions, and skills. In qualitative research, ontology and epistemology guide the methodology of the research.

Ontology is the "researcher's beliefs about reality" (Terrell, 2023, p. 290) and epistemology is a "researchers' beliefs about their role during the research process" (Terrell, 2023, p. 282). Ontologically, this research asserts a relativist approach, assuming the experiences of student affairs professionals have multiple realities and meaning will be jointly developed between participants and myself. Each person who has experienced this phenomenon is going to have a very different perspective on how they have created their reality and how this reality may be different to them. As a current student affairs practitioner, with oversight of my university's student death protocols, I am inextricably linked to the phenomenon of this study. My close relationship to this topic creates a natural opportunity to co-create knowledge through human interaction with the participants as I learned of their experiences.

The constructivist and interpretivist epistemological approach notes that knowledge is constructed through human interactions. Interpretive research attempts to pursue understanding for a phenomenon (Pascale, 2011). My research is interpretivist and qualitative and explores the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Through an interpretivist approach, I sought to understand the experiences of these professionals and how they make meaning from it.

Methodology

A constructivist approach to the world asserts that people build knowledge as they experience a phenomenon. Utilizing this paradigm, there are multiple ways to approach this research but a phenomenological methodology, one which focuses specifically on the experiences of participants, provides for the rich experience of participants to be conveyed through the research. Phenomenological research provided me the opportunity to explore the essence of what it means to be a student affairs professional who leads an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

I conducted this dissertation using hermeneutic qualitative methodology. Martin Heidegger, founder of hermeneutic phenomenology, believed there was no way we could separate our experiences from the world around us (Peoples, 2021). To best study a phenomenon, we acknowledge our pre-existing understanding of the matter and then embark on a spiral process of analysis, also known as a hermeneutic circle. This analysis happens as you break down information into parts, synthesize, and then look at the whole again. Through this interpretive analysis, themes are developed in the research based upon the participants' experiences.

I used a phenomenological methodology to explore the lived experiences of the student affairs professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death. Specifically, I am interested in three areas of this work: 1) the training or preparatory work, 2) useful knowledge, skills, and abilities for responding, and 3) available self-care and aftercare. The phenomenology methodology is an appropriate approach within the constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, as it investigates the "meaning of the lived experience of people to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by research participants" (Bloomberg, 2023). Additionally, this methodology, situated within the constructivist paradigm, accounts for the active participation and interpretive nature of the researcher.

It may be easy to assume a general understanding of the experiences of those who experience death, especially a death by suicide. With death comes feelings of grief, anxiety, exhausting, or even secondary trauma. However, as stated by Starks and Trinidad (2007), "Phenomenology contributes to deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions about these ways of knowing" (p. 1373). And yet, as Sokolowski (2000) asserts:

> Phenomenological statements, like philosophical statements, state the obvious and the necessary. They tell us what we already know. They are not new information, but even if not new, they can still be important and illuminating, because we often are very confused about just such trivialities and necessities. (p. 57)

Phenomenology attempts to capture meaning through the close examination of the core of an experience.

Although my intent is to bridge the gap in existing literature on student affairs practitioners who experience college student death by suicide, my research is not intended to create policy or theory to inform the field. As described by Guignon (2012), "Hermeneutic phenomenology sets out to describe human beings as they show up in 'average everydayness,' prior to high-level theorizing and reflection" (p. 97). Phenomenology is intentionally used to explore the individual experiences of participants and explore the universal essence of the phenomenon.

Research Design and Methods

According to Bloomberg (2023), "Qualitative research is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants" (p. 70). As such, I conducted this research using a qualitative research design, utilizing a phenomenological methodology. I used qualitative methods grounded in phenomenology to conduct the research for this dissertation. In this section, I will discuss methods for sampling, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Sampling

I used purposive sampling to design the sample for this study. Specifically, I used criterion sampling because I sought to interview participants who have experienced the phenomenon I studied. I recruited participants who (a) identify as a student affairs professional, (b) are not currently employed within the Universities of Wisconsin, (c) have led an institutional response to a student death by suicide. It was difficult to find participants willing to discuss their experience, likely due to the sensitive nature of my topic. I began with a plan to do an open call for participants but soon discovered I would

need to be more strategic in my approach. I changed to a targeted approach whereby I did a Google search for college student deaths by suicide and then researched the corresponding university administrator via their institution's webpage. I sent that administrator a personal email, acknowledging their recent loss and requesting their participation in my research.

It was hard to determine the ideal number of participants before starting the research. Peoples (2021) argued that saturation is more important than the number of participants, stating, "While the sample size is certainly something to consider, saturation … is the key focus in qualitative work and should be noted as the goal rather than including an estimated sample size" (p. 49). Saturation is achieved when no new information is obtained from interviews (Morse, 1995). My target was to interview between five and seven individuals.

I emailed 24 students affairs professionals over the course of three weeks in my first recruitment. (see Appendix A for email). Additionally, I asked fellow students in the Student Affairs Administration program to forward my request to colleagues who met the inclusion criteria (see Appendix B for email). The combined approach yielded a total of one participant.

Following this, I changed my recruitment strategy. Using the more targeted approach previously discussed, I emailed 27 student affairs professionals over a week and a half (see Appendix C for email). Overall, after outreach to over 50 administrators, I yielded a total of nine responses. Two administrators declined due to the time commitment, two began the initial screening process but did not respond to the request to schedule an interview, and five administrators completed the full interview process.

Because people of different cultures, backgrounds, and identities respond to and make meaning of death differently, as described in my literature review, I thought it was important to interview participants of diverse identities. Having experienced the phenomenon of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide, my study has the benefit of the perspective of a White, cisgender female dean of students from a four-year institution. As such, I had a goal of recruiting a diverse group of participants. In addition to the personal identities of participants, I was interested in the campus type (residential vs commuter) and the student identity who died by suicide. The initial recruitment email included a link to a Qualtrics survey, which asked specific personal and demographic information (see Appendix C) to ensure my participant pool is representative of multiple identities and experiences.

All five participants who responded met the inclusion criteria. Following verification of this, we began to exchange emails to set up our first Zoom interview. Prior to the first interview, each participant was sent an email that included the informed consent information (see Appendix D) and further details of my study.

Data Collection

I have been informally collecting data on the topic of responding to a student death by suicide via conversations with colleagues for years; it has given me a way to make meaning from the most challenging part of my professional life. Yet the dissertation process requires a more formalized method of collecting data. As the researcher in this qualitative study, I was the instrument in gathering the data (Bloomberg, 2023). My primary method of data collection will be semi-structured interviews.

In phenomenological research, a semi-structured interview protocol is recommended (Peoples, 2021). This structure allows the researcher to develop interview questions specific to the research questions while permitting for flexibility for participants to discuss other relevant information. This style also allows for the interviewer to ask follow-up or probing questions (Terrell, 2023). I will address the ethical concerns of the data collection and maintenance process in the ethical considerations section below.

All interviews were held over Zoom and recorded with the participant's consent. The first round of interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes and interview questions were structured around my research questions as well as the general knowledge, skills, and preparation for leading a response on behalf of the university. Although Zoom created a transcript of recordings, the review and edit process took significant time with each transcript to ensure clarity. After cleaning the data by editing the transcript to remove unnecessary words and clarifying errors in the transcript, I read each transcript for initial themes. I then conducted a second interview with every participant to allow for clarification and to ensure accuracy. The second round of interviews via Zoom allowed me to develop follow-up questions based upon information shared in the first round, allowing participants to further explore their experiences. This set of interviews was shorter, ranging from 20-40 minutes.

Phenomenological interviews focus solely on experiences, not about thoughts, feelings, or perceptions (Peoples, 2021). As such, all interview questions focused on the participants' experiences with leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide (see Appendix E for my list of interview questions). I was interested in the

following areas of the response process: (a) available training or preparatory work for student affairs professionals for this work, (b) useful knowledge, skills, and abilities in this work, and (c) available self-care and aftercare in this work.

Questions for the second interview were developed after initial analysis of the first round of transcripts. I used this interview to clarify information from the participants, confirm initial themes, and further discuss their student death protocols. Additionally, I used the second interview to discuss potential themes developed from the first interview. At the conclusion of the second interview, I asked participants to provide a copy of their institution's student death protocols. This document was used for analysis and to provide triangulation between this data and the two sets of interviews. Four of the five participants emailed me a copy of their institutional protocols. One participant declined upon advice from their institution's legal counsel.

Data Analysis

The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the essence of an experience or as Van Manen (1990) states, "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9). To do so, one must take specific steps to analyze the data—or the narrative experiences—shared by participants. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher uses a hermeneutic circle whereby acknowledging our pre-existing understanding of the matter and then embarking on a spiral process of analysis. This analysis happens as you break down information into parts, synthesize, and then look at the whole again. Through this interpretive analysis, themes are developed in the research based upon the participants' experiences. Peoples (2021) shared the following steps to conduct data analysis:

1. Reading and deleting irrelevant material: Review the whole transcript and remove all unnecessary language. During this step I read and re-read the data while listening to the transcript to ensure accuracy, providing me the important opportunity to spend time with the data.
2. Generate Preliminary Meaning Units: Review the transcript for initial themes or "meaning units" which may provide information about the phenomenon being investigated. I attempted multiple methods to review the data for themes, including Dedoose and Excel spreadsheets. However, I settled on printing out the transcripts and color-coding the text with highlighters. This method also allowed for memoing in the margins, which was helpful as I moved into step three of the process.
3. Generate Final Meaning Units: Review the preliminary themes or "meaning units" from step two and group these into themes or "final units".
4. Situated narratives in the transcript: Using the final meaning unit themes, examine the transcript for direct quotes that exemplify the theme.
5. Synthesize Situated Narratives into General Narratives: Create general narratives from the situated narratives by unifying accounts into a general description.
6. Generate General Description: The final step aims to "discuss the themes that were implicit in all or most of the participants' descriptions of their experiences … uniting the major phenomenological themes into a cohesive general description" (p. 62).

These six steps represent the hermeneutic circle and demonstrate the iterative process

used to analyze data. This process must be done for each transcript, with the end goal of developing general themes relevant to all or most participants about the experiences of student affairs practitioners who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

Trustworthiness

Essential to any quality research is confidence that the researcher, participants, and consumers of the research know the work has been constructed and executed in an ethical manner. In qualitative research, this concept is often defined as trustworthiness (Bloomberg, 2023). Stahl and King (2020) provided this explanation for the importance of trustworthiness:

> Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to provide researchers with process-based, narrated, storied, data that is more closely related to the human experience. One can learn so much from another's experience, and from a good story. Yet, the degree of trust one has in the person telling the tale has much to do with the degree of trust attributed to the telling. It is the same with studies conducted from a qualitative research approach. Indeed, building trust is imperative. (p. 26)

Trustworthiness is key to qualitative methods in the way validity and reliability are critical to quantitative methods. Demonstrating trustworthiness is how a researcher lends credibility to their work.

Important to establishing trustworthiness is addressing credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. *Credibility* is achieved when the researcher accurately portrays the experiences of the subjects through their research (Bloomberg, 2023). Inherently, the hermeneutic process provides for methods that build credibility. I

accounted for credibility in multiple ways: I used hermeneutic analysis to analyze data transparently and use the direct quotes of participants whenever possible. I used a form of member checks whereby I: (a) asked participants if they wanted to review their transcripts for accuracy (all declined the offer), and (b) used the second interview to ask clarifying questions from the first interview. Additionally, I used journaling and memoing throughout the research process to document any assumptions, biases, and prejudices that surfaced.

A researcher establishes *confirmability* by demonstrating that the findings are objectively derived from the data (Bloomberg, 2023). The phenomenological approach of co-constructing research presents a unique challenge to this check on trustworthiness that is less of a concern in quantitative research. However, I addressed confirmability through reflexive journaling. Additionally, I will preserve all copies of recordings, transcripts, and journals for a minimum of five years, creating a clear audit trail.

Dependability is demonstrated when the researcher shows the study is replicable and the data remains consistent over time (Bloomberg, 2023). This criterion does not mandate the data or results be the same but rather the study itself be repeatable. Furthermore, dependability can be achieved by de-identifying transcripts for colleagues to review and analyze for codes. I displayed dependability in my research by clearly outlining my research design and process, ensuring that another researcher would be able to replicate the steps.

In qualitative research, *transferability* is "the extent to which a study's findings can be applied to other similar contexts" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 123). Unlike in quantitative research, in qualitative research, the findings are not meant to be generalized

to the larger population or replicated for consistency. Findings are shared in deep, rich context and it is left to readers to draw parallels to other experiences. I have used thick descriptions, full of details, of the participants' experiences in my findings to elicit a strong narrative for readers.

Ethical Considerations

Inherent in conversations about death by suicide are trauma and grief. It is important to this study and to the participants that all ethical guidelines are strictly honored throughout this dissertation process. The initial proposal was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse for review and approval. When my recruitment strategy changed, I submitted the modification to the IRB (see Appendix F). Before their participation, each participant was given a detailed informed consent document (see Appendix G). This document conveyed the scope of the research, that their participation was voluntary, and that they may withdraw from participation at any time with no penalty. I reminded them of this prior to our interviews, as well.

Participant confidentiality was prioritized throughout the process, not just for the benefit of the research participants but also because they were being asked to share experiences of the death of a student on their campus. For this reason, confidentiality was and is critical. I used pseudonyms in the transcripts and the ensuing analysis and discussion sections of the dissertation. A separate key that links participants with their pseudonym will be kept in a separate location in a password protected file. All identifiable information in the transcripts were removed prior to the final dissertation. I will maintain all copies of recordings, transcripts, and journals for a minimum of five

years and then destroy them from my computer.

Asking participants to share the essence of leading a campus community through a death has potential to bring forward complex emotions. As such, there are ethical considerations in approaching my relationship with each participant: honesty, responsibility, and reciprocity. From the outset of this study, I have been *honest* about my research interests and the research purpose will participants. At all steps in the process, participants were provided information on the research purpose in order to establish trust. Additionally, I requested vulnerability of my participants by asking them to discuss this topic. I had a *responsibility* to honor them by completing the study and finishing my dissertation. Finally, I hope participants found the process of speaking about their experiences leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide to be just as educational as I did. I demonstrated *reciprocity* of learning with a thank you letter to each participant.

In this study, I asked participants to share their experiences about a professional experience with student death that may have had significant personal and professional impact. I did not know how participants would react to resurfacing these experiences. As such, I prepared for this uncertainty by utilizing a robust informed consent process where I included national mental health resources. Some participants may have had an emotional reaction to the interview. As Wright (2020) discussed, the concept of sentience, the capacity to experience emotions and feelings, can be healing. I allowed participants the space for this experience but also reminded them of the ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

Summary

This chapter outlined how I used qualitative methods, specifically a phenomenological methodology, to conduct to study of the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide. The chapter began by discussing the constructivist paradigm and phenomenological methodology by which this study will be framed and conducted. Next, the study design was explained in detail, including information on data collection and analysis. Lastly, I discussed issues of ethical considerations and trustworthiness.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter the data has been organized to present the research findings. The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide in higher education. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (Peoples, 2021), a hermeneutic methodology that also acknowledges my own pre-existing understanding of the matter.

My research was guided by the following questions: How do student affairs professionals describe their experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide? How, if at all, do student affairs professionals experience secondary trauma associated with student death by suicide? How do student affairs professionals make meaning of this experience? This chapter begins with a detailed description of each participant followed by a thematic description of the findings.

Participants

My recruitment approach yielded a sample of five participants with personal identities and professional backgrounds (years in the field, type of degree, type of institution) different from my own. Because people of different cultures, backgrounds, and identities respond to and make meaning of death differently, as described in my literature review, I thought it was important to interview participants of diverse identities. All five participants were senior-level administrators with terminal degrees. Participants

indicated a willingness to participate to "pay it forward", knowing it can be difficult to find participants, particularly due to the sensitive nature of this topic. Each participant was able to share multiple experiences of leading a response to a student death by suicide and articulated steps from an institutional process or protocol.

The participants served at public institutions from different regions of the country and of multiple different ethnic and cultural identities. Participant demographics are outlined in Table One. Two participants self-identified as female and three as male. The female participants both shared a general awareness of their role in the process and a concern that the role becomes overly feminized or mistaken as a caretaker, whereas the male participants did not share such concerns.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Institution Description
Alan	Male	White	Public, 4-year, state flagship
Walt	Male	Black	Public, 4-year, large R1
Lina	Female	Asian Pacific Islander	Public, 4-year, state flagship, R1
Iris	Female	Black	Public, 4-year, Ivy League
Michael	Male	White	Public, 4-year, multi-campus

Participant One

Alan is a White male. He is the dean of students at a public, 4-year institution on the East Coast. He describes the institution as a state flagship R1 school with a "community feel." Although this study is limited to the experiences of leading a response to a student death by suicide, Alan shared many parallels to leading a response to a student death by any means. His background in student affairs began in residence life and is rooted in student care work.

Throughout the interview, Alan frequently referenced the idea of collectivism, the idea of valuing society and others over the individual (Bok et al., 2021) in the aftermath of a student suicide. For example, he explained, "when a student does die, some of the most difficult people to work with will show up . . . we'll do what needs to be done to help that student's family, their friends in the community." Unlike other participants, Alan spoke to his work to prioritize his self-care and not just when doing the difficult work of leading an institutional response, sharing, "I know that if I didn't have excellent mental health practices for the most part that I wouldn't be able to weather these things."

Participant Two

Walt is a Black male who works as associate vice chancellor at a very large public institution on the west coast. He has built a career deeply rooted in student support, particularly focusing on students in crisis. He began his tenure at his current institution as its first non-clinical case manager, eventually establishing an office specifically for student support and belonging, which he continues to oversee in his current role.

His extensive experience in student crisis management has been a defining aspect of his career. Throughout his time at his current institution, he has been involved in

addressing student concerns and crises and has contributed significantly to the development and growth of support systems for students in distress. Before his work at his current institution, he worked in various other roles where crisis management was a key component of the work.

Walt's career trajectory highlights his expertise in crisis intervention and support, as well as leadership in fostering an environment of belonging for students. His long-standing commitment to students' welfare has shaped his approach to creating systems and structures to assist students in times of need.

Participant Three

Lina is a female Asian Pacific Islander who is the dean of students at a midsized 4-year public institution in the western region of the United States. She described a deep and varied background in student affairs and student services, with over 20 years of experience. She began her professional career in housing and residence life. Over time, she transitioned into roles within student activities, women's resources, and a dean of students office. Her career path reflects a commitment to serving students holistically, supporting them not only in academic and social pursuits but also in times of crisis, including those involving self-harm, suicidal ideation, and gendered violence.

She has developed a strong focus on culturally sensitive practices, decolonizing conversations around justice, and understanding the complex realities that students face. She emphasized the importance of showing empathy and being ready to connect students with the right resources, especially when dealing with difficult issues like self-harm, crisis, or student conduct. In her role as associate dean of students, she managed a diverse set of programs, including services for underrepresented and vulnerable student

populations like veterans, foster youth, and undocumented students. This role also included being a respondent services officer for Title IX issues, navigating complex, difficult conversations with individuals facing accusations, and helping them access mental health support.

Lina also holds a strong sense of cultural and ancestral responsibility. She identifies as Indigenous and incorporate her cultural values into her professional ethos, viewing her work as a means of being a "good ancestor" for future generations. She believes in providing grace and support, even for those who may have caused harm, while balancing accountability with empathy.

Participant Four

Iris is a Black female who is the dean of students at a prestigious 4-year East Coast institution. Iris coordinates the response every time there is a loss at her institution and feels that it is sacred work. "Nobody goes into student affairs because 'I want to tell people about dead people,' but this is something that happens in the role." She describes the students at her institution as high achieving, book smart, but also developmentally younger than their age would imply.

Iris has an extensive career in student affairs, spanning 21 years and encompassing a wide range of roles and responsibilities across different areas of higher education. Her career has been characterized by both specialized and generalist roles, providing them with a broad and comprehensive understanding of student affairs. She started in residence life and have since expanded her expertise into areas such as pre-bridge programs, admissions, multicultural student affairs, first-year programming,

orientation, and campus activities. She also has experience in crisis management, including being part of on-call rotations and handling high-pressure situations.

Iris's career trajectory reflects a deep commitment to the holistic development of students, with expertise in a variety of student services and crisis management. Her experiences have given her a well-rounded perspective on student affairs, from administrative leadership to direct student support, crisis management, and policy development.

Participant Five

Michael is a White male who serves as associate vice president and dean of students at a 4-year public institution on the East Coast. As the first person to hold the title of dean of students at his current institution, he has played a key role in establishing and shaping the position within the university. His portfolio includes a wide range of student-focused responsibilities including traditional student affairs work (student health, non-clinical case management, student conduct) and overseeing various student success initiatives, including mentoring programs for students of color and civic engagement efforts.

Since his initial arrival, the scope of his responsibilities has expanded, and he has shifted from a heavily student-focused role handling crisis situations to managing a team of five people and providing support to staff who, in turn, support students. His work has evolved into a more administrative role, though it still centers on the well-being and success of students, even as it increasingly focuses on supporting the staff who carry out this mission. Different from other participants, Michael and his staff have done some preliminary work on patterns or predictors to student death by suicide using data from

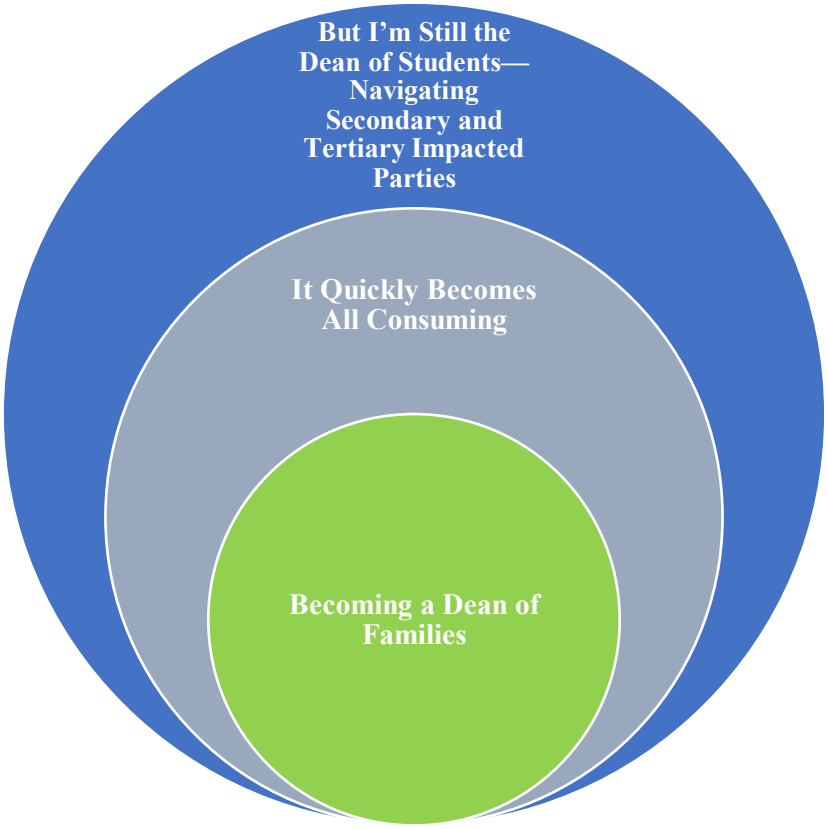
tragedies at his institution. He has a background in mental health counseling, which he believes serves him well in this work.

Themes

Phenomenological analysis involved a thorough, multilayered examination of each transcript and the four student death protocols. Through an in-depth analysis of the data, I was able to identify three themes, each with sub-themes. Each theme described the participants' lived experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. The themes emerged in terms of distinct groups of people involved in or impacted by the student death process. The themes were identified after line-by-line analysis of the transcripts. The three major themes are: (a) becoming deans of families, (b) all-consuming, and (c) navigating secondary and tertiary impacted parties. The themes can be represented by a circle, as seen in Figure 1, with the theme of deans of families most central to participants' accounts, "it quickly becomes all consuming" depicted a ring once removed, and those tangentially impacted depicted as the outer-most ring.

Figure 1

Themes from Participant Interviews



These themes will be addressed separately. The participants' words, directly quoted from the interview transcription, supported each theme.

Becoming a Dean of Families

The theme of family quickly developed into a strong theme throughout the interview process. The concept of family and its importance to each administrator both professionally and personally was highlighted in each interview. Professionally, the desire to care for all elements of the grieving family came through time and time again, highlighted most practically in the work of policies and protocols. As the interviews progressed, participants spent more of our interviews discussing their focus upon the

family, impact to the family, and their role in providing compassionate care to the grieving family, as opposed to their more positionally defined role as a dean of students or vice president for student affairs. Walt said, "working with the family is both the most difficult and challenging part, but often the most rewarding part simultaneously." When discussing a particularly challenging student death, Michael took this theme a step further and said, "The reality was, I really wasn't tending to what happened to the student. I was tending to the fallout with the family."

This theme was comprised of four secondary sub-themes—Supporting the Family, If You Need Someone to be Mad At, This is Someone's Child, and Implementing a Family-Centered Policy. These sub-themes are each distinctly different ways the participants related to the families of the deceased students and yet display the interconnected way in which the theme of family was woven through their stories.

Supporting the Family

Perhaps the strongest subtheme from the study was the participants desire to support the family of the student who had died by suicide. Lina said this work is not for everyone:

> I think you need to have the temperament of being willing to be with people when they're in pain. That's what I mean by temperament. In order to be to be successful in this position you've got to be willing to listen and to sit with somebody who is sharing their pain.

Michael discussed the process of providing a posthumous degree or certificate of attendance, indicating his office will get the diploma framed. "We will work with the bookstore, even if we buy it either through our account or some of us have just done it

out of our pocket," indicating a level of personal investment to this process. Lina shared a personal piece of advice she gives to every bereaved family:

> I just have three things I gotta ask of you: Please eat, even if it's a snack. Drink your water, because there's lots of stuff you're going to do, and you're going to forget. And rest, whatever that looks like, I know you might not sleep, but at least just rest.

Alan confirmed this theme in our second interview, indicating it resonated strongly with him, sharing an example of a time when he worked very closely with a bereaved family who eventually took legal action against multiple entities excluding the university. He strongly believed the university was excluded due to the relationship forged in the immediate aftermath of their son's death.

One participant did not feel that her role was to shepherd families through the student death process. During the second interview, I asked Iris to comment on the "dean of families" theme. She initially indicated a general disagreement with my assessment. At her institution, she coordinates the overall process of responding to a student death by suicide, but her direct reports work directly with the family. However, another staff member on her campus may assume this role. She reasoned, "Yeah, that doesn't resonate with me . . . My role is to really clear the path so that my team can be the associate dean of families. I think my staff would say they feel like they're like the deans of families."

Supporting bereaved families, often going above and beyond to extend care, was evident in the work and throughout the interviews. Whether through administrative action to ease a family's to-do list or a gentle reminder to take a moment to drink water, participants took care to ensure all needs were met.

If You Need Someone to be Mad At

Working with families as they navigate the death of a loved one brings forward a spectrum of emotions for families, not just grief. Michael shared an example when a student died by suicide near campus. The student had sent a text to his mother with his intentions. The mother then traveled to campus and Michael and his staff were confronted by her. Michael described her as "heartbroken, in shock, but also, I want to say, angry." In addition to questions about his academics and recent internship, the mother requested that staff call her ex-husband to give him the news of the student's death. The staff was quickly placed in the middle of family dynamics, which Michael did his best to mitigate.

Iris and Walt described managing situations when the student death by suicide is very public, but the family is not willing to share information. Walt indicated that his university process is to defer to the family in terms of what information gets shared and what does not. However, when a death is public and a family requests privacy, it often results in rumors that the campus is trying to hide things. Walt elaborated,

> I will say this pretty openly, if somebody needs somebody to be mad at, and that gives the family solace, I'm happy to be the person that people yell and scream at because they think I'm hiding something. You're not yelling and screaming at the family.

Iris described an instance of navigating a situation when the student newspaper ran a story about a student death which was picked up by a website that generated a fake obituary. The family demanded that the university work to have the AI-generated, fake obituary taken down. This administrator had to explain to a grieving family that the

website was within their constitutional rights to run the article, and the institution could not and was unwilling to do anything about it.

In yet another example, Iris shared the story of navigating a student death where the surviving campus community knew the student was trans, but their family refused to acknowledge the student's true identity. Walt shared a similar example and elaborated on the difficulty of navigating this within the student trans population on campus, stating,

> It's really difficult to convince those communities sometimes that no, the parents get to make these choices and the university, we're not going to. Not only are we not going to, we have no standing to step in and tell a family, "no, that's not what that person's name was, and that's not what that person's pronoun was." Then causes harm to that community.

In such instances, participants honored the wishes of the deceased student's family but then needed to navigate the anger and frustration of the grieving campus who knew the student in a different, or in their eyes more authentic, light.

Lina had multiple examples of complicated family dynamics, including an instance when a student died by suicide and two sets of people were claiming the body of the deceased student. In another instance, rather than getting involved in the family dispute, she sent the posthumous degree to the person listed as the student's emergency contact. She shared, "That conversation was hard because that made other people upset. But we can't, because of estrangement, define family and who family is and who family isn't."

In the best of times, navigating family dynamics can be a delicate dance. When a family is walking through, as Walt described "the worst day of their life", participants

shared multiples examples of navigating delicate situations. In some situations, this required them to make difficult decisions, have uncomfortable conversations, and sometimes, become a punching bag for a family's grief.

This is Someone's Child

The experience of death affected individuals in varying ways. Two participants disclosed their status as parents, with Michael highlighting the impact being a parent had on leading responses to suicides. He shared that, "The big difference is when it happens to someone who is a parent. If you are the headspace of this could have been my child, or this is someone's child, it's totally different in the room." He described a time when a bereaved mom showed up at his office immediately after learning of her son's death and the significant impact it had on the people who are parents on his staff. He described,

> They are seeing a mother brought to her knees in our office with the loss of a child. How do you be understanding, sympathetic, and keep yourself together? You just see the deer in headlights almost like secondary or tertiary trauma.

Conversely, Lina shared significant resentment for members of the campus community who use their "reproductive privilege" when trying to make meaning of a student death by suicide, insinuating that one does not have to be a parent to understand the grief of loss. Expanding on her statement of reproductive privilege, she said that she has been told, "Well, you don't understand because you're not a parent." Her response? "Okay, you want to go there? Because I can. Well, you don't understand because you haven't been doing this for a very long time. You just understand what it what it looks like."

Lina often hears from faculty and staff after a campus announcement is sent, sometimes just to process their grief and sometimes to ask if they can contact the student's family:

> So, I get angry about this because people are like, "Oh, this is so heartbreaking." No shit. Yeah, we know it's heartbreaking. And don't, "As a parent . . . This is so heart wrenching. They have to be in so much pain. Can I contact them?" No, you can't. So, I always say, I'm saddened to share the following information, XYZ had passed away on such and such date. The family has requested privacy. I have to put that every single time, because if I don't, people will say, Can I contact them? No, motherfucker, you can't. That is not your business.

Lina further examined the topic of parents in relation to how the campus community responds to a student death. She said she often has to remind colleagues who are parents to pull back from responding emotionally rather than following the established protocols. Although not written into a policy, in part because she does not know how to incorporate something so delicate, she reminds colleagues not to "trauma bond" with bereaved families and "deal with your own shit."

The concept of being a parent in this study had mixed reactions from participants in terms of their parental status. Even amid the complexity of the responses, it was evident that it was not lost on participants that doing this work had depth and requires an accompanying sense of respect. Whether someone was a parent or not, all participants had an almost protective mentality towards the parents and families of the deceased student, indicating the parental status mattered less than the role.

Implementing a Family-Centered Policy

Naturally, the topic of the process by which the participants worked through a student death by suicide was a theme in each conversation. A subtheme within this topic is an emphasis of family-centered policies. Iris highlighted this when she shared, "I have built a process that is intentional for us to put the focus on families and students who have experienced this unbelievable loss." Her initial draft of a process was more of a "worksheet." However, after receiving feedback from her staff that this was too sterile and like a checklist for graduation, she modified the process to include more human contact between the institution and family.

In the second interview, participants shared best practices and areas for growth in their processes. Throughout each process, participants clearly articulated a deference to family preferences and a sensitivity to family grief, with Walt sharing, "We really defer to the family in terms of what information gets shared and what doesn't. And some families are like, yeah, share it. It's fine. It's okay. Some families are like, don't mention it to anybody."

All five participants indicated they had either a role in revising their institution's current policies, or they were the author. Four of the five participants provided me with their institution's internal policies used to guide their process. Some policies call out a section of the policy specific to the work done with the student's family. Michael's institution discusses the timeline of communication with the bereaved family. It also makes specific mention of "referring to the student by name." Iris and her staff learned the hard way when a family took issue with a staff member referring to the student as "the deceased." Lina's policy speaks more to the practical aspects of working with a

family—communicating with the family to receive a death certificate to provide to financial aid for debt forgiveness. Two policies include templates for communicating with families, especially in the initial phone call to the family of the deceased student.

All four policies that I reviewed begin with an initial, personal outreach to the deceased student's family to offer condolences. The timing of this outreach appears to be related less to efficacy and more to providing a compassionate bridge to a grieving family. Walt discussed multiple instances when he followed up with the family of a deceased student two or three days after his initial call, only for the family not to have any recollection of the first phone call. Iris shared an instance of a family responding very tersely to her offer of condolences and needing to remind herself,

> "Okay. You want to move through these steps. You're not looking to invite us in in that way." Other families are and that is not about me. It's not because I asked wrong or asked right or it's because it's you and not somebody else.

The policies differed in length and style, some were bullet points to be checked off and others began with a narrative to ground practitioners in the work prior to moving into the practical work of the step-by-step actions. One policy had a section dedicated to "Communication with the Family of Student", which takes care to place emphasis on honoring the family's wishes in any campus communication. All four policies contained a reminder to mark the student's record with a "deceased" indicator, which will route all mail, bills, and inquires back to the institution rather than to the family.

The policies drove the work of leading the institutional response to a student death by suicide; however, it was not the totality of the work. Ultimately, the participants

found a blend of both procedure and care was best when implementing a family-centered policy.

Most of the participants had professional titles of deans of students, positions closely associated with student support and advocacy. As a current dean of students, I see myself and my office as a hub for students; a place to connect them to available campus resources and help navigate the complexities of higher education. The themes developed in this research revealed that when a student dies by suicide, the responding professional appears to move from a role of primary student support to focus on support for the family of the deceased student. Participants describe navigating a range of activities, attitudes, and behaviors with families similar to their work with students. For this reason, even if just for the duration of navigating the student death protocols, it appears the responding professionals transitioned to becoming deans of families.

It Quickly Becomes All Consuming

Leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide may not be included in a person's position description but when it happens, it quickly becomes all-consuming for those tasked with this important job. Iris articulated this when she said,

> This stress changes my full day. I need to think about getting myself into the mindset of talking to a family that's experienced an unreal loss and also herding my colleagues in the academic area who don't have the skill set equipped to navigate the student loss as both something emotional, but also something logistical, that has steps, and that has things that need to be put in place to sort of support the family, support the community and communicate.

Michael echoed these sentiments when articulating how the overall process feels when he shared,

> The way I describe it with other counselors is you feel sapped. You didn't do very much today. There's not marathon running. There were no crazy workouts, but you feel mentally and physically tired. Drained. Part of it, I think, was the intensity of the situation, the constant evolving of what had happened with the student.

In this theme, I reference both the participants as well as the staff they work with and supervise in implementing student death protocols. This theme was comprised of five secondary sub-themes—Addressing the Trauma and Emotional Impact on Others, It's Hard Work and It's Heart Work, Compartmentalizing for Self-Preservation, Navigating the Personal Impact of Leading, and Utilizing Directive Over Collaborative Leadership. Using the participants compelling accounts, these sub-themes highlight the consuming nature of this process from multiple angles.

Addressing the Trauma and Emotional Impact on Others

I initially sought to discover if participants experienced secondary trauma as a byproduct of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. What my analysis uncovered was less the impact of secondary trauma but more the concern for the impact of trauma on colleagues involved in the process. When I asked Walt about this theme, he indicated a strong agreement, saying he was glad to hear the people who do this work tend to worry more about the trauma of others. He elaborated,

> You have to have the constitution for it. I can care deeply about these things, but I also am pretty good at leaving it at work, and I think people who are successful in

these roles tend to have that disposition and that's the reason why there is concern for others who do not do the work every day.

Alan shared that he intentionally takes on most of the protocols in the process himself to protect his team from the difficulties the phenomenon. Iris expanded upon this, stating:

> They take things out on your staff and then you have to support a team of folks who feel that they are doing everything they can in a really tragic situation, and understand that a family is grieving, but then also are taking some blows that you know aren't meant actually for you. But they're mad at the world because they've lost someone.

Lina shared this sentiment, with an emphasis on the frontline staff in her office. She was concerned about how she can support this staff, knowing many people in these positions "just want to work the front desk and they are on the front end of some gnarly stuff and providing them with spaces where they feel competent." Michael echoed this concern for the case managers in his office, many of whom take on the direct support to those impacted by the student death in the immediate aftermath. He recently surveyed staff who do this work, asking them directly about their self-care needs and expecting to hear they that wanted time together. Instead, the staff shared that they wanted time away from the office. Walt has found in times of trauma, "my brain is not really in a place to create [self-care] solutions for myself" and has taken a proactive approach by developing a menu of options for his staff to select from when the trauma of their work becomes overwhelming.

Alan initially shared that this theme did not resonate with him, stating he does not worry about the trauma of the team he works with in this context. He then paused, reflected, and said,

> Well, and maybe this is what you're saying, I work really hard to protect that team. And part of it, like I said, is, we don't have a really decent response structure. You know, I'm doing most of the very depressing hard work. The second person is our director of counseling, and I just take it for granted that she's pretty self-aware in terms of her psychology. There really isn't a lot of other people on the team that are kind of directly interfacing with families, or law enforcement, or any of the other things that would go into potential trauma. So, I don't spend a lot of time . . . well, maybe I do worry about them, and that's why I don't really let them get very involved directly with some of that stuff.

The general concern for the trauma and emotional impact of others shared by participants may provide a professional buffer against the effects of secondary trauma caused by exposure to student death by suicide and bereaved families. Further, mitigating this has the potential to increase longevity in the field for student affairs professionals. Participants showed more concern for the impact of this work on their staff than themselves, although they did acknowledge this work takes a toll.

It's Hard Work and It's Heart Work

This is not work that the participants of my study went to graduate school for nor something they may have trained extensively to do. In some cases, they stumbled upon the work although all participants began their student affairs careers in residence life, which requires on-call rotations and crisis training. However, the phenomenon of leading

an institutional response has become heart work. When I asked Lina if there was anything else she wanted to share with me, she said, “I think it’s hard work. It’s heart work. That it takes a particular type of temperament.” She said she does this work, in part, to honor her ancestors. Lina also concludes her work in every student death case by honoring the deceased student with a small, personal ceremony in the garden on the campus quad.

In our second interview, I asked Walt if he wanted to reflect upon this subtheme, and he indicated a strong agreement with the idea of this work being heart work. He elaborated with:

> It goes to that piece where you’re talking about the heart work where I really genuinely care about these students and the family, and I don’t think I could do this work if I didn’t care about the students and the family. But part of how my care shows up is this is the worst day of your life. Let me take the things that you don’t need to worry about right now. Somebody needs to. So, you just found out your student died, your son, your daughter, under the awfulest of circumstances. I can’t imagine. You’re grieving. You’re trying to figure out all these details that I can’t imagine how you do. I will make sure that their room is packed up, and I will make sure that we take them off of the roster. When it comes to heart work, that’s how I can contribute, because you’re going through this very personal, awful experience.

While Iris did not have a reaction to the concept of heart work, she shared this experience with packing up a student’s room:

> There’s a way to do it. You wouldn’t just throw their clothes in a box and send it to the family, but that you would pack them with care and love as a representation

> of like, “Hey, I’m sending you home your child and I want you to open up that up with like memories not just disdain that I threw in their retainer with three sweatshirts in a box.” People don’t know that; they don’t know that the professional work is also in those details.

These quotes emphasize the heart put into the work outside of just steps put forward to implement the policy on paper. The work of responding to a student death by suicide may not have been a professional calling; however, the act of doing the work and doing it to honor a student and provide closure to a family appears hold significant to participants.

Compartmentalizing for Self-Preservation

While there is little doubt that there is a personal impact to participants resulting from their work with this phenomenon, participants have learned how to limit the extent of the impact. The key to this has been their ability to compartmentalize the actions of the job from them as humans. Rozuel (2011) defined psychological compartmentalization as the process through which “we isolate and separate certain aspects of our personality from the rest of our personality or from our core self” (p. 686–87). Participants described various ways they operationalized this concept throughout the interviews.

Iris discussed her relationship with death because of this phenomenon. She recognizes it as an omnipresent thing that is always imminent and is always happening, and that she responds to death a little more “antiseptically” now. Further, she stated,

> That experience is exhausting. It’s also a space where I feel like I actually shine. I would say that probably one of my strengths professionally has been navigating crisis, navigating some of the most difficult moments that students or colleagues

> can have on a college campus and doing so with an ability to support our team with my ability to support my team and to not necessarily compartmentalize, but recognize that at the end of the day the loss isn't about me and it's not necessarily my personal loss.

Walt shared the need to prepare himself before every meeting with a family, stating,

> One of the things that makes that difficult is, it's usually an emergency situation; you're having the rest of your day, and something happens. You got to get out of your chair and go deal with it and I often need a moment to sort of steel myself to kind of make sure that I am in an emotional state to be able to do what I need to do.

While Walt indicated a good level of support from his supervisor as he does this work, he further elaborated on this subtheme by saying,

> And sometimes it's hard for people to understand you need that minute or two, right? Particularly higher administrators are like, "Okay, [name], you're going over there. You're gonna do this, this, this and this." And I'm like, "Yes. But before I do that, I need to close the door to my office for a minute or two and prepare myself for the fact that I'm about to meet with a family on the worst day of their life." And it's not going to be okay for me not to have control of my own emotions. That is not easy work, and I need a moment to steel myself, to be able to be emotionally prepared for that and then I can't then just come out of that and then go into my next meeting about the budget, right? That there is a transition I need to make as a human being to allow me to do this work that is really work

> that very few people have to do in their lives, and that I do 5, 6 times a year. And it's really hard to explain to someone who hasn't had to do that you need to steel yourself to do that kind of work.

Participants experiences of compartmentalizing also extended to the staff they work with. While discussing ways he supports the staff in his office, Michael shared stories of the trauma and compartmentalization presents in their processing following a student death by suicide. He indicated the following,

> I've got two staff members who [are] really good about . . . compartmentalizing things that they struggle with or getting towards trauma, but they really don't want their teams to know how it's really, really affecting them. You want to come across as human, but you also don't want to put it in a box and not address it. Both those folks do have therapists that they work with off campus and then they share with the team "I've got someone I'm working through" so everyone knows.

When responding to a student death by suicide, those who care did not seem to have capacity to totally remove themselves or their emotions. And yet, as strong professionals, they adapt the skills and abilities to cope, ensuring they can provide the required leadership to grieving campuses and families. This research suggests a component of this coping involves compartmentalizing the phenomenon to ensure they remain effective in their role.

Navigating the Personal Impact of Leading

In this subtheme, I explore the impact to participants of leading the institutional response to a student death by suicide. By its very nature, the work of coordinating a process includes coordinating the disparate work of others, which may not always go

smoothly. While participants shared many stories of leading an institutional response when a family was grateful for their compassionate support, they also shared stories of angst and the personal impact. Alan described this can be as simple as knowing the potential impact of making a misstep: “You know you deal with enough of these things that you just realize that if you screw this up, people’s lives are going to be changed forever.”

Iris explained the complexity of navigating such situations as, “Feeling like you’ve done right by the parents and families but you’re also in the middle of their grief and so they take things out on you.” Most participants shared a willingness to be the target of anger and angst if it spared the family additional grief. Until prompted to discuss their own self-care, they did not expand upon how they processed this targeted behavior.

Lina discussed the impact of doing this work, often without formal training in bereavement. She mused,

> How do we do that in a way that makes us seem smart and approachable, knowledgeable, like we know what we’re doing. As if we’re experts, as if we are not asinine assholes. That we are credible, and there’s so much so much at stake. That we’re feelers, but we’re not feelers. There’s so much at stake in the work that we do. And we’re still in a field that is not seen as relevant or credible. There’s so much with that, and we’re still putting out other fires with whatever else, what other crisis is going on at that moment.

The personal impact of leading through a student death by suicide was almost seen as an afterthought to participants, although they did acknowledge the breadth and depth of the work. It was not until we talked about every other possibly impacted

population before participants wanted to discuss their own experience and resulting self-care. This hesitation to prioritize their own well-being speaks to the often-overlooked burden placed on those in leadership roles during such crises.

Utilizing Directive Over Collaborative Leadership

This theme captured the participants' need to exercise a specific set of leadership skills while leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Each of the administrators I interviewed demonstrated strong leadership qualities, substantiated by their background and supervisory portfolio. However, the interviews clarified that this experience elicited a less collaborative, more commanding style from them to lead, as discovered through their own words in the transcripts.

This subtheme was best summed up in my conversation with Alan, when he discussed challenges that he experienced initially implementing the student death protocols on his campus. He said, "There's definitely some times where I think people are a little bit like, who is this guy telling me I'm gonna meet with him, talk to my admin, but I have not shied away from that." As the author of his institution's current policy, Alan went on to say, he believes his directive approach has been embraced by staff on campus,

> I think people really appreciated that it wasn't chaos. I remember just about the email communication specifically. In retrospect, it's really strange. I was working with the executive director, the spokesperson. And I was like, we need to always send an email or we're gonna be called for inconsistency, and she was just like, Oh, thank you, Alan, I've been trying to do this for years, and I appreciate you calling attention to it. And in my head, I'm like, that's great but also, what was

> stopping you? Be the spokesperson. Just say it's so. But I think a lot of people have challenges stepping into those kinds of authority. I'm not gonna be authoritarian about it. But I am gonna make decisions.

Walt honed in on this subtheme when talking about the need to be very clear when communicating with departments, contemplating the balance between a collaborative and directive style of leadership:

> I hate to say it because I think collaborative is generally the best way to go, but sometimes I need to be able to say, "Don't do that," and make sure that that people are listening to for me to be able to say to someone in another office. Do not send this parent a bill. We can. We can worry about how it gets paid. But the student's parent, the student, just died in very awful circumstances. It is not appropriate to send them a $25,000 bill.

All participants discussed this experience with a level of expertise and competence. Alan said, "If you can't care enough to plan what you would do when a student dies, then what do you possibly care about in this field? I just think leadership matters . . . this is where you will prove your value." Some participants were able to articulate specific trainings that assisted them upon assumption of this role; however, the overwhelming narrative from participants was the best training was experience.

On the flip side, Iris shared a concern that the institution may dismiss her expertise in navigating the protocols as professional handholding or babysitting, rather than seeing her as professional who does the work really well. This was echoed by Lina, who struggled with juxtaposition of the over feminized dean of students office focus on

care was set against the patriarchal dean of students office of rules and enforcement. She went on to share,

> We're trying to figure, how do we move from either this or this? Be a place of accountability and care and concern, and people being valued for their humanity rather than being valued for the ways in which they're the biggest asshole. I worry that the dean of students are going to be pigeonholed into this place of "we only respond to crisis, that's all we do. We have to figure it out because we are a brilliant breed of professional staff."

This was the only sub-theme in which the participants gender had an impact on the data shared. It was also the only time that participants talked about the need to lean into their titles or be directive in their leadership styles to accomplish their required job duties of leading the response to a student death by suicide. Interestingly, when a male did so, he was thanked for his assertiveness whereas when the two female participants were more directive in their approach, they worried about being "overly assertive" or "too motherly."

The concepts of experiential learning and lack of formal training have been extensively discussed both in the literature review and in the previous theme. This sub-theme helps to uncover the more tangible skills demonstrated by participants while leading their campuses after a student death by suicide: decision making, navigating competing priorities, project management, assertiveness, and setting limits.

In summation, this theme highlights the complicated, often overwhelming nature of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Participants described this work as "heart work" but also something they work to compartmentalize from other

aspects of their life to provide boundaries and self-care. While addressing their own compulsion to do the work at a high level, some shared stories of their desire to protect their teams from concerns of secondary trauma or burnout. Meanwhile, the concept of utilizing directive leadership was shared by most participants, indicating those outside of the immediate process needed stronger direction. The balance of navigating these factors provided valuable support to emphasize the overwhelming nature of this phenomenon.

But I'm Still the Dean of Students—Navigating Secondary and Tertiary Impacted Parties

The third theme that emerged from this research was the impact of people not immediately associated with the student who died, such as family or the participants themselves, but nevertheless still effected by the loss. Although participants were given the primary responsibility of leading an institutional response, they shared stories of the other complex, often messy dynamics associated with this phenomenon.

This theme was comprised of three secondary sub-themes—Experiencing Collectivism, Navigating Rogue Actors, and We Gotta Keep an Eye on Other People. In this research, this group of people was often people listed within the student death protocols: faculty, administrative offices, friends of the deceased student, and senior-level administrators.

Experiencing Collectivism

My conversations with participants often centered on the difficulties associated with leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide, including examples of when participants needed to apply a heavy, directive hand in shepherding colleagues through the student death protocols as noted in the previous section. However, there were

a few examples from participants that highlighted the way a campus tragedy can bring out the collective nature in the community. I labeled this subtheme as collectivism, with the hope of capturing the idea of the community over the individual.

Alan said:

> When a student does die, some of the most difficult people to work with will show up and we'll figure it out, and we'll do what needs to be done to help that student's family, their friends in the community. It's the same way with the behavioral intervention team, right? Talking about a student crisis who's got an AR15. We don't know what they're going to do. People just put the bullshit aside and they get together and they figure out how we're going to handle this thing. It's sad that we can't apply that mindset to everything. I don't look forward to students passing. But when it happens, I notice the shift, and how colleagues show up for that.

Walt was quick to emphasize the positive response from the campus community in the wake of a student death by suicide, sharing stories of roommates who offer to pack a student's belongings on behalf of the family or an academic department who paid for the family's hotel. Iris shared that after a particularly difficult tragedy, the athletic director gifted her box to staff at home athletic events and catering dropped off cookies and encouraging messages.

Lina, who is of Hawaiian descent, shared that the collectivist nature of this work is one of the most important components of the work. She shared a story about her grandmother's mango tree which has been bearing fruit for their family and the neighborhood since the 1920s. Lina's grandmother taught her the concept of *malama*

aina, which means "that which feeds." Lina finds parallels between her grandmother's fruitful mango tree and the work of leading a response to a student death by suicide. She explains, in part, by saying,

> I have an obligation to look at this work as community work. If we're looking at this from a community standpoint, a community health standpoint, I have an obligation to care for the staff in the areas that I'm responsible for and help them understand that it's not just them. They are interconnected with each other, the work that they do is connected, and they collaborate with each other.

Most people can think of a time when tragedy brought people together. Participants had little trouble recalling stories of ways the campus community rallied after a student death by suicide. One participant went a step further, sharing personal stories of how this work generally is community work for her. The general feeling from participants when having these discussions was a wistfulness, wishing that sense of collectiveness could extend beyond just times of tragedy but also knowing the work is more complicated than that.

Navigating Rogue Actors

While the death of a student by suicide may bring out the best, most collaborative spirit in some campus partners, participants also shared many stories of frustration when faculty and staff acted outside the scope of their role. Iris described the tiring nature of this when she said,

> I need to show up as an empathetic person to the family and also be a hard ass with my colleagues who want to skirt protocol because they feel or see that we

need to be responding differently. Or who then center themselves, as opposed to thinking about a family. That experience is exhausting.

Alan shared a similar thought when she said, "My role is to help keep communications tight to try to prevent rogue deans from posting on social media about it against the wishes of the family."

Lina echoed this when she shared that experiences of working with demanding colleagues who give directives as opposed to following the established policies and protocols. She described her reaction to this, saying,

> It's hard for me to manage my anger partially, because I bottle up my emotions. And what I what I really want to say, I can't say, because I like to use the F word a lot. And I need to just let them do whatever they're going to do, close my door and just let it rip. But also, it's typically these well-intentioned individuals who think they know everything.

Lina had other examples of navigating campus politics involving rogue actors who want the protocol or process to be implemented on their timeline. She shared, "There's a false sense of urgency that other people have. I often get emails: 'I need to know all about the student so the president can write a letter to the family.' Okay, but you don't need it now."

Walt echoed other participants' general agreement with this sub-theme when he shared the following story of a well-intentioned but rogue faculty member:

> This wasn't a self-harm, but we had a student who died from some misfortune in Mexico, and the faculty sort of over involved themselves, and got the university into a pretty difficult situation that I then had to sort of slowly pull ourselves out.

> At one point the faculty literally called my office and said, "Well, I need you to fly down to Mexico to meet with the coroner and escort the body back." And I had to be very sensitive in telling them that that wasn't actually something that was part of my job, or really part of the university's responsibility.

Administrators tasked with leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide are working through difficult, often complex situations. Navigating rogue actors while responding to a student death by suicide is complicated by the emotions of the phenomenon. When faculty or staff step outside the bounds of protocols, there is rarely time for a composed, measured response. In such high-pressure circumstances, administrators must balance immediate, sensitive actions with long-term support, ensuring both institutional integrity and compassionate care for the affected community. The overall complexity of navigating a student death by suicide requires administrators to be adaptable in their leadership approaches based on evolving circumstances. For example, an administrator's initial response may require a more directive leadership approach in order to avoid chaos and confusion, while a more collaborative and community-based approach is more appropriate to lead the campus through the aftermath.

We Gotta Keep an Eye on Other People

The subtheme of contagion and a general concern for limiting its community spread was referenced by all participants. Contagion is defined as an increase in suicidal behaviors resulting from exposure to attempted or completed suicides (Walling, 2021). Based on his experience, Walt shared,

> Suicide contagion is very real, and I've been doing this for a long time, and I still don't 100% know what to do about it. I don't know how to get ahead of it. I don't know how to identify who's most susceptible to it. I would very much like someone to do more research on that. Because I feel a little bit lost when I know it's an issue, and I've seen it manifest itself on our campus. And it happens and one of my first things is okay, "we gotta keep an eye on other people," but I don't know what that looks like. I don't know how to do that.

Walt spoke to the complexity of managing contagion when he shared, "The contagion piece is relevant every time a student passes because contagion doesn't require that the initial death actually technically be self-harm. All it requires is [perception]. And therein lies the difficulty." Michael echoed this complication about contagion in his interview. Walt works to mitigate some of the risk around contagion with proactive training and conversations with areas such as academic affairs and media relations.

When discussing the way her institution's process has changed over the year, Iris indicated the impetus was in part to minimize contagion. She said she told colleagues,

> [there are] negative public health implications if we don't do it the right way. We can't say this, because what that does is, it just creates an avenue for students to potentially feel like, okay, look at all this attention that came this way. Let me do this right. And so we have to minimize contagion.

Alan echoed concerns for contagion and shared the difficult line he walks in these situations, "Obviously everyone's always very attentive to contagion . . . We are always trying to strike the right balance about what we do. Because doing too little, you cause concern but doing too much, you risk contagion."

Michael shared that part of what compelled him to participate in this research was the importance of looking into the factors around "how we handle and manage and work through suicide." At his institution, they have done just that, digging into the data from students who have engaged in suicidal behavior for patterns. "It has been one of the things that has increased, but in a very kind of quiet, yet sometimes very patternistic way." He hopes this work better informs the prevention as well as postvention work on their campus.

All participants were concerned, and rightly so, about the risk of contagion following a student death by suicide. The immediate risk is often assessed by a university's counseling center; however, when leading the institutional response, participants discussed their role in reducing contagion when sending campus messaging and other support resources. In this context, participants emphasized the importance of carefully crafted responses to minimize the risk of contagion, acknowledging that the way an institution handles the aftermath can significantly influence the broader community's mental health and well-being.

This final theme attempts to capture the tension experienced by participants as they navigating leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Theme one highlighted participants often feeling like they focused more upon support and assistance to families, becoming deans of families during the phenomenon. Theme three illustrates that responding professionals are asked to balance the relationship established with families while retaining their title of dean of students, or a similarly situated student affairs position. While working with bereaved families, and all of the previously

explained complexities involved, this theme highlights the additional tensions and considerations a responding professional may need to take into account.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented my findings from my phenomenological study into the experiences of student affairs professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide. I conducted ten interviews, two with each of the five participants and reviewed four of the five participants' student death protocols. An in-depth analysis of the data yielded three themes, each with various sub-themes. "Dean of families" captured the strong emphasis participants placed on doing right by the families of the deceased, with subthemes identifying the complications family dynamics bring. "It quickly becomes all-consuming" highlighted the personal nature of working through a student death by suicide. It described the phenomenon in relation to the participants themselves. "But I'm still the dean of students—Navigating secondary and tertiary impacted parties" illuminated the breadth of people who are involved in the process and the impact this has on the participants' experience.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this study, I gathered and analyzed the experiences of student affairs professionals who have led an institutional response to a student death by suicide. I carried out this study using Kolb's experiential learning as the theoretical framework and used interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore participants' experiences. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (Peoples, 2021), a hermeneutic methodology that also acknowledges my own pre-existing understanding of the matter.

Chapter V provides a summary of the study by revisiting its problem statement and objectives. It reflects on the research question and relevant literature, offering an overview of the study's results. An analysis of these findings follows, where I address the research questions by comparing the results presented in Chapter IV with the existing literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter II. Finally, I present recommendations for student affairs practices and suggest directions for future research on the experiences of professionals who lead an institutional response to student death by suicide, based on the study's findings.

Summary of Study

Death by suicide is the second leading cause of death of college among traditionally aged college students in the United States (Hayes et al., 2020). When a college student dies by suicide, an institution must appoint a representative to lead the response, providing direction, comfort, and closure to a grieving campus and family.

There is extensive research available about suicide prevention and postvention, on how to mitigate suicide contagion, and general information about student death protocols. At the time of this study, there was limited research about the experiences of the student affairs professionals asked to lead the institutional response after a student death by suicide.

The literature review provided a framework for the subject of student death by suicide, with in-depth information about risk factors, training for student affairs professionals, skills, knowledge, and abilities to respond, and aftercare. Highlighted within the literature was the lack of formalized training on suicide response for student affairs professionals as well as prescribed self-care and aftercare through institutional support.

I used criterion purposive sampling to recruit participants for this study, seeking participants who (a) identified as a student affairs professional, (b) were not currently employed within the Universities of Wisconsin, and (c) have led an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Five participants self-identified and participated in two semi-structured virtual interviews. Four of the five participants also provided copies of their institution's student death protocols. I used a hermeneutic circle and interpretive analysis to break down information into parts, synthesize, and then look at the whole again. Using this method of analysis, I identified three themes, each with sub-themes.

In this chapter, I explore the findings organized around the three main themes identified in Chapter IV. The following section analyzes these findings by relating them to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of student affairs professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Three questions guided this research:

1. How do student affairs professionals describe their experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide?
2. How, if at all, do student affairs professionals experience secondary trauma associated with student death by suicide?
3. How do student affairs professionals make meaning of this experience?

The following sections seek to answer each research question.

The Experience of Leading an Institutional Response to a Student Death by Suicide

The experiences of participants who led the institutional response to a student death by suicide were compelling, rich, and professional with underlying tones of their deep commitment to the work. Throughout my interviews with each participant, it seemed evident that this work has personal meaning to them. For example, one participant shared how she tries to situate this work in lessons from her family and grounding herself in the land, reminding administrators there are cultural needs to be sensitive to as we navigate loss. Similar sentiments were communicated by (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008) in their article about contextual perspectives of college students. Several of the themes and sub-themes I identified in my analysis situate easily into this research question.

I sought to study the experiences of student affairs professionals responding to a student death by suicide and found in my research I was hearing far more about the

experience of working with the bereaved families of the deceased students. Each participant was able to clearly relay to me stories of sad, angry, frantic, stoic, distraught, shocked parents. In the aftermath of a student death, these student-facing professionals quickly became focused upon serving families. The work of serving students moved to other support offices: counseling services, dean of students office, case managers, and more.

One participant described the work as "heart work," and although no one else used this phrase, each interview had elements of how participants approached the work with care. Two participants talked about packing up the residence hall room of a deceased student and finding belongings they did not think a bereaved family would appreciate: drugs for one, dirty magazines in another story. They relayed how they made the decision to work with campus partners to dispose of these things so as to not escalate an already highly emotional situation. Another participant talked about the importance of packing a student's belongings with care and the importance of not just throwing "their retainer with three sweatshirts in a box."

Equally emphasized by participants was the need to be a strong leader throughout the experience of responding to a student death by suicide. Participants relayed stories of university officials attempting to sidestep protocols, at times because they outranked the participant and at times because they cared and wanted to express sympathy. Regardless, participants demonstrated the ability to provide leadership skills to rally rogue colleagues while keeping the institution and family at the center of the work. One participant said they strive for a collaborative approach to their work but when leading after a death by suicide they often must resort to a more directive style.

Secondary Trauma Associated with Student Death by Suicide

I began this study with the intention of gathering information about the experiences of participants to determine if they experienced secondary trauma as a result of leading the institutional response. Analysis of the cases indicated the participants did not experience secondary trauma, which is defined as "stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (Figley, 1999, p. 10, as cited in Lynch & Glass, 2019). This is not to say that the phenomenon of leading the institutional response was not stressful, but based on our interviews, I do not believe participants experienced secondary trauma from the phenomenon. Importantly, participants did not feel they experienced it either. However, it is unclear whether participants had experienced trauma or secondary trauma in the past.

Rather than concerns for their own secondary trauma, participants indicated an interest in managing the secondary trauma experienced by those they work with and manage. While Alan initially said this concept did not resonate with him, he then backtracked a little and shared that he "works really hard to protect that team." Walt has developed a proactive approach to caring for those who do trauma work, ensuring they have a curated self-care menu available to them during difficult times. Lina talked about how protective she feels about frontline staff (administrative staff, student staff, program coordinators) who do not have adequate training for this work and are sometimes the first to confront the grief of this work.

The folks I met with were all seasoned professionals: student affairs professionals with terminal degrees. All participants began their careers in housing and residence life, which often lends itself to a training ground ripe with on-call rotations, crisis calls, and

unexpected emergencies. Additionally, residential life staff participate in "training programs, which increase perceptions of preparedness, self-efficacy, and knowledge" (Walpole et al., 2023, p. 3). This hands on, experiential learning provides an introductory experience to professional stress and perhaps lays the groundwork for developing professional skills to managing the pressure.

The participants portrayed an understanding and ability to reckon with the complex nature of leading through a student death by suicide. Student affairs is projected to become more transient and as such we will continue to see more turnover in direct student serving positions, as well as those in non-clinical case managers and assistant director positions (Bischel et al., 2023; NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2022). This forecasting makes the training and preparation for these critical positions even more challenging.

Making Meaning

Park and Hinshaw (2010) defined meaning making as "the restoration of meaning in the context of highly stressful situations" (p. 257). Throughout my study, I sought to learn how those tasked with leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide could assign meaning to this work. I did not ask participants directly how they made meaning from the experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Interestingly, however, participants organically used this language when talking about their experiences.

Michael discussed the various ways he works to make meaning from this experience but also acknowledged the difficulty in finding any meaning and moving on from a tragedy. Alan talked about finding meaning through creating a student death

process that provides a clear definition of roles and responsibilities. He said, “People crave that, you know. When a student dies, you don’t want to just get 20 people in a room and it’s so, so now, who’s doing what, right?”

When sharing how she makes meaning from loss and death, Iris said, “We can do better by people if we’re intentional, and we take the necessary steps to honor families and to honor the students that we lost, and to provide the support for those that need it.” Lina echoed this sentiment, sharing that she finds meaning when she can answer the family’s questions, provide support, and then say the three things at the end to let them know that there was someone else not related to them who cared. At the conclusion of every student death, Lina then goes into the memorial garden on campus and goes into ceremony “to honor a child that had passed away.”

Although Walt did not use the exact language of meaning making, he shared the experience of navigating the aftermath of when his mother and brother died, saying he did not have the ability to deal with the administrative tasks and yet they were his responsibility. He went on to say that because of these experiences, and because he is rarely emotionally attached to the student who has passed, he can do the things that allow the family to deal with what is important.

Like all participants, Alan finds value in this work and puts considerable effort into doing it well. He shared:

> You don’t really get to be in a job like ours and not find value in dealing with the worst things imaginable. When I tell people I’m a dean of students, they’re like, “That sounds terrible.” And I’m like, “I mean it and it isn’t it.” The things that I find terrible are the budget, not this. I’m sure if a student was dying every week, I

would, at some point, have to go to a residential program or something. But you deal with enough of these things that you just realize that if you screw this up, people's lives are going to be changed forever, and I generally don't screw things up. And so that's rewarding. When these men who were just decompensating on a Sunday night see me [later], and they pull me aside, and say, "You know, I know we say this all the time, but I can't thank you enough for what you did for our chapter." That's rewarding.

Participants found meaning in different ways as they navigating the process of leading their institutions through a student death by suicide; however, each participant was able to share ways they made meaning. The interviews suggested that this phenomenon may have both professional and personal impacts on participants, highlighting the importance of allowing time for the process of meaning making.

Interpretation of Findings

Examination of the study data yielded several important findings regarding student affairs professionals experiences when leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. Themes evident in the data were the focus on families of the deceased student, the emphasis of the personal nature of this work, and concern that staff in their responding departments do not experience secondary and tertiary trauma.

Theme One: Becoming a Dean of Families

The work of liaising with families in the aftermath of the death of a student by suicide is complicated. Participants described instances of being the first on the scene in the aftermath of a suicide at a fraternity house or being the first professional a shocked, grieving mother encountered as she arrived on campus after receiving a suicide note from

her son. A traditional student death protocol provides the practical steps to closing out a student's records, refunding accounts, and all the while being expected to also provide support to campus. However, it does not discuss the delicate, trauma-informed work that often happens behind the scenes by the competent professionals I interviewed. This theme and its sub-themes told the story of this critical work.

Participants detailed accounts of heartbreaking loss, and their professional instinct was to support and protect the families of the deceased student. It was clear from the data that participants felt, regardless of whether this was in their job description explicitly, this work was something they were compelled to do and to do well. They provided examples of using their own money to deliver posthumous degrees and staying well beyond business hours to care for a grieving mother.

Participants also identified challenges in working closely with families of students who died by suicide. As Walt shared, "[We are] asking difficult questions of families in the aftermath of the worst day that they've ever had." Not every family was receptive to the university's involvement nor invited their assistance. Iris shared a similar experience and her need to remind herself that the response is not about her. Other challenges included being placed squarely in the middle of difficult family dynamics, through which participants showed tremendous ability to gracefully navigate.

Although the theme "deans of families" did not resonate with all participants, the concept and subthemes behind the theme did. The data was rich with stories of participants pushing their personal and professional selves to the limit to provide care to ensure the families of the students who died by suicide had no undue burdens put on them by the university.

Theme Two: It Quickly Becomes All Consuming

The second theme elevated in the data was the personal nature of the work associated with leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide. The participants I interviewed were exceedingly competent professionals, all with decades in the field and terminal degrees. Compellingly, they also revealed a personal side to their approach to this work.

Participants were aware that the student who died "is somebody's child" and approached the work with a level of sensitivity they felt was appropriate for the situation. For Alan, he grounded the work in being a father himself. Walt reminds himself that this phenomenon will be the worst day of that parent's life. For Lina, the personal nature is different. She has grown tired of the "reproductive privilege" levied at her by others. Both Lina and Iris navigate this phenomenon from the lens of non-majority identified women in higher education and believe this has an impact in how they experience the process.

Participants have tended to navigate this phenomenon by compartmentalizing certain aspects of it, likely for their own self-preservation. Walt shared that he needs a moment to gather himself before he steps into the fray of implementing the student death protocol, knowing that each time a lot will be asked of him emotionally. Iris indicated she has experienced a lot of death, both personally and professionally, and compartmentalizing is her best way to work through things professionally.

In an echo of some initial findings from theme one, participants shared that the work of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide can be both hard work but also heart work. Although this does risk some elements of participants working

towards compassion fatigue, also known as the cost of caring (Davis, 2019), it appears the heart work of navigating such emotional, complex situations is what compels these professionals to both continue with the work and do it at such as high level.

Theme Three: But I'm Still the Dean of Students—Navigating Secondary and Tertiary Impacted Parties

Although the families of the students who died by suicide were the primary focus of the participants interviewed for this study, it quickly became clear that hovering in the background was a whole host of people the participants were being asked to juggle. As with any tragedy, this experience brings out the best and worst in people. Participants described navigating this through the lens of the phenomenon of leading the institutional response.

The student death protocols shared by participants differed by institution but had more similarities than differences. They outlined a timeline for family outreach, the process for campus (or absence of) campus notification, and processes for things like account refund, residence hall move-out, and bereavement support resources for survivors. Inherent within each process is also the potential for a campus and community response to the implementation of the death protocols.

Participants shared positive and negative ways their campus and communities responded to the institution's response to a student death by suicide. All participants had examples of faculty and staff trying to step outside of appropriate guidelines for communication with the bereaved families or unfortunate rumors of the campus trying to cover up malfeasance. In contrast, some shared stories of pockets of the university

community coming together in shows of support following the death of a student, demonstrating the positive role shared responsibility can play in tragedy.

Perhaps the most overwhelming subtheme of this theme illustrates the overwhelming task being asked of professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide: concern for contagion, an increase in suicidal behaviors resulting from exposure to attempted or completed suicides (Walling, 2021). As Iris said, when a student dies by suicide, it changes the whole day, if not week. Walt articulated this well when he said,

> Part of leading the institutional responses is I feel like I have two often competing priorities. First priority is working with families in the aftermath . . . At the same time, the other priority is making sure the university and institution has what it needs to continue the work of the institution.

The participants I interviewed were varied in title but all had some level of responsibility to monitor and mitigate suicide contagion. The balance of placing primary focus on the families in the aftermath of the death but also providing campus support to reduce contagion appeared to create a level of professional angst and stress for participants.

Summary

The findings related to the experiences of participants suggest that leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide may be a small part of their overall job, but it has a significant impact on them both personally and professionally. Despite this phenomenon not appearing in many position descriptions, responding to a student death is an almost universal experience for senior student affairs professionals (Cusick, 2008; Wrenn, 1991). In spite of the significant challenges of the phenomenon, this work

has the appearance of being approached as a calling, with an intense drive to do it well. Further, beyond the scope of the work defined in institutional policies and protocols, there is care and concern for student contagion and colleague secondary trauma. However, these participants cannot be assumed to be representative of all student affairs professionals. Instead, these findings provide insights about the leverage points for aiding institutions and higher education professions who navigate responding to student death by suicide, which will be discussed in the recommendations for higher education practice section.

The Role of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, p. 38). Going into this study, I posited that most professionals in senior student affairs positions who lead an institutional response to a student death would not have advanced counseling degrees nor significant training to do this important work. My research supported this hypothesis. Thus, the concept of experiential learning is important to this phenomenon and the world of higher education must understand this to ensure we continue to do our work well.

In the absence of best practices of who should lead an institutional response or standardized trainings in response by college officials to bereaved families, experience appears to be the best education. This theory was echoed by all participants in my research. One participant had formal training as a licensed counselor and still shared some of his most valuable training was "because it happens so often." When asked about specific training for doing this work, another participant said, "None, like absolute none. You just hope that you've had a job where you're in the room so that when you're

leading the room the next time, you kind of know what the room looks like. There's no training." This affirms the research of Zinner (1985) in her seminal work "Coping with death on campus", which acknowledges this is work student affairs professionals are often unprepared for and attempts to provide a roadmap to the work.

The theory of experiential learning expounds that learning occurs in any setting and continues throughout an individual's life (Evans et al., 2010). This would indicate that there are tangential experiences to this specific phenomenon that can be called upon to assist in these situations. Iris appeared to agree with this idea when she said, "If you've experienced a loss, then you might have the word." Other participants shared training through working with suicide hotlines, prevention modules, and professional organizations such as National Association for Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment (NABITA) and the Higher Education Case Managers Association (HECMA).

Yet, there does not appear to be standardized training for the critical work of representing an institution and leading when a student has died by suicide (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Cusick, 2008; Norton, 2017). As such, the concept of experiential learning is key to participant's experience. As Alan stated, "At the end of the day, the best training is gonna be to experience it and being someone to see what it takes to be in the next role when that happens." Siegel (1985) noted that much of the work we do in working with bereaved families and working in the aftermath of death does not require specific skills but rather needs empathy, kindness, and respect. The professionals interviewed for this study demonstrated these skills in droves.

Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

This study holds important implications for student affairs professionals and higher education leaders. Most participants had stories of being one of the first on scene of a student death by suicide or being the person to convey the death to the next of kin. However, only one participant had formal training in counseling; all others had traditional student affairs degrees. Experiential learning, while important, has its limitations. As previously discussed, the landscape of higher education professionals is experiencing more turnover, resulting in less institutional knowledge. The phenomenon of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide is not an area where an institution wants to rely on happenstance experience. Rather, this should be an area where research and resources are devoted, ensuring professionals asked to do this work are prepared.

This research found that professionals who experience this phenomenon encounter a significant request of their time, resources, and emotional capacity. It is incumbent on presidents and chancellors of universities to empower the professionals who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide to execute the student death protocols without interference. In these instances, implementation of the student death protocols, which likely are authorized by the president, should be within the discretion of the lead professional in most instances. Student death protocols should be reinforced by supervisors. Resistance ultimately should be resolved by the president's office.

Second to this recommendation is that the professional who leads the response must have a team in place to assume secondary responsibilities. This includes assumption

of daily responsibilities for the urgent day-to-day work while the leader is taking care of immediate needs such as communication with the family, working with the coroner, facilitating campus communications, etc. It also encompasses working with segments of the institutional community connected to the student death such as vulnerable student populations to contain contagion, rogue faculty or staff, students who request additional information outside the protocols, etc. This will assist the responding professional in focusing on the bereaved family and meeting its needs while ensuring the campus community is also being addressed appropriately.

The third recommendation is to establish better protective measures for student affairs professionals who do the work of responding to student death by suicide to mitigate concerns for secondary trauma. Although this research suggests the lead professionals do not experience secondary trauma, the sample size is small, and the results are based on participants' own assessment. I interviewed seasoned professionals all of whom were protective of their less seasoned staff —protecting them from trauma perhaps. It may be the case that initial instances with death by suicide may result in secondary trauma. Secondary trauma can show up in small ways, such as avoidance or lack of creativity. It can also result in sleeplessness, interacting less with family and friends, dualistic thinking, and lack of empathy (Lynch, 2023). Knowing the potential professional and personal impacts, universities should invest in appropriate supports to assess for and counsel through secondary trauma.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Future research is needed to best support student affairs practitioners who work with student death. This study was limited to the experiences of practitioners who lead a

response to a student death by suicide; however, as one participant said, “Students have died, including by suicide, at every college I’ve worked at.” Although participants were able to share some differences between a death by suicide and a death by other causes, the death of a young person is tragic regardless of how. I scoped this study specifically to death by suicide but to fully understand the phenomenon, I recommend future research expand to focus on death from health complications, accidental death, murder, etc.

The second limitation and suggestion for future research involves the participants’ professional and career experience. My research did not yield that the participants experienced secondary trauma in responding to a student death by suicide. As previously noted, all participants were seasoned professionals with terminal degrees. I believe the potential to experience secondary trauma or even just their general overall experience may have been different if I interviewed participants earlier in their careers. This hypothesis is supported by one participant who said,

> If I had to rewind to my 20-some-odd-year self, the lack of experience, the lack of understanding, some of those things are different. On the flip side, you would expect to have a sense of maturity as you go through these things. I do think it’s important, though, to also have an understanding that you can’t become numb to it, you’ve got to confront it and understand it, and that’s a part where you might make a little piece of meaning and move on. But you’re not letting it control me like when I was earlier in my career. At the same time, I understand that these things happen, and the role that I’m in now needs to facilitate and support others.

The years of experience and experiential learning provided valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth, something not yet afforded to young professionals.

Further research should be done to determine if this theme holds true on seasoned professionals and how younger professionals experience secondary trauma.

The fourth limitation and suggestion for future research focuses on the relationship between the professional and the student who died. Notably, no examples provided by participants included an instance of a death of a student that the practitioner had worked with. The stories of the work to support families was done for students unknown to the professionals. Future research should study the impact to a professional when leading the institutional response to a student death by suicide when they or their office had a relationship with the student who died. This study may yield different results about the impact of secondary trauma.

The final limitation and suggestion for future research focuses on the gender of participants and the institution size and type. While I asked participants to share their gender identity, I did not specifically ask them if they felt this played a role in how they navigated the phenomenon of leading through a student death by suicide. That being said, the research suggests the two female participants had different experiences than the three male participants. Only the two female participants described concerns about their work being seen as "professional handholding or babysitting" or grappled with the "juxtaposition of the over feminized dean of students office focus on care was set against the patriarchal dean of students office of rules and enforcement."

Combined with the literature from Wright (2020), which suggests there are already narrow-minded assumptions of student affairs professions, many of which are rooted in whiteness, the female participants had different experiences than the male participants, who made no mention of their gender or sex when describing their

experiences. Future research should explore how gender identity impacts the experiences of practitioners asked to lead this phenomenon.

The second component of participants' demographic experience that deserves future exploration is the size and type of the institution they are asked to lead. Analysis of the data from this study did not yield a difference in the experiences of participants based upon the type of institution nor their regional location. However, all participants were employed at public institutions and all had student populations no smaller than 14,000. One participant referenced a colleague who does this work at a much smaller college, where the school does yearly memorials for student deaths, inferring that the institution size may have an impact on this experience. Further research would provide more data on this hypothesis.

Conclusions

In this study, I sought to study the experiences of student affairs practitioners who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide. I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the way five student affairs practitioners experience this phenomenon. I used criterion purposive sampling to recruit participants for this study, revealing participants who (a) identified as a student affairs professional, (b) were not currently employed within the Universities of Wisconsin, and (c) have led an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

I carefully reviewed the data and used the hermeneutic circle to identify themes and subthemes, revealing the main themes: becoming a dean of families, it quickly becomes all-consuming, and but I'm still the dean of students—navigating secondary and tertiary impacted parties. The themes centered on participants' focus on the importance of

focusing on work with bereaved families, the personal nature of this work, and the multitude of people involved in the process that participants must also address.

The findings of this study provide insight into the experiences of student affairs professionals when asked to do critical work to lead an institution through a tragedy, a student death by suicide. However, these findings should not be generalized as they reflect the experiences of the five individuals who participated in this study. Although the results of this study may not be universally applicable, university administrators can still implement tangible steps to ensure professions in this role have appropriate authority, skills, training, and self-care resources.

I have led my institutional response after student deaths, including student deaths by suicide, for almost a decade. It is complicated, exhausted, emotional, and fulfilling work. The first time I experienced this phenomenon will remain in my memory forever – I still send the family an email on the anniversary of the student's death. Each subsequent death becomes less difficult personally but the pull to do right by the family remains firm.

This study and my experience tell us there is little formal training to prepare you to lead the overall process, to speak with a grieving family, to pack up a student's dorm room, to stand firm against the chancellor's office asking for an unreasonable request. There are important trainings that enhance preparedness: suicide prevention and postvention, participation in emergency operations, trauma-informed care, compliance, and more. There is no single advancement pathway that adequately equips a student affairs professional with all of the skills needed in student suicide response. Though, there are several options for skill building to support this work, complicating the way professionals prepare for this important experience.

The experiences shared by participants, grounded in Kolb's theory of experiential learning, compel me to suggest this work is not for entry-level or even mid-level professionals. This work is for student affairs professionals who have experience with crisis intervention and seasoned leadership skills, combined with a written policy to guide the work. For me, this research revealed some critical intangible skills professionals must all possess: the heart, stomach, and stamina to do the work of holding space with grieving families and students and the ability to exert appropriate authority to effectively enact the process. As Siegel (1985) asserted that "much of what we do in reacting to death does not come from a special set of skills" (p. 105). This combination of hard and soft abilities is a delicate balance and while participants did not want public acknowledgement of their work, I hope this study helps to bring light to their important work.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Study on Coordinating an Institutional Response to a Student Death by Suicide – looking for participants!

Dear fellow student affairs professional,

My name is Kate Demerse. I am currently employed as the Associate Vice Chancellor of Campus Life and Dean of Students at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

I am writing to you because I have identified you as a potential participant in my dissertation research aimed at exploring the experiences of student affairs practitioners who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide. This study uses Kolb's experiential learning theory and the concept of secondary trauma as a lens through which to conduct this research. I am seeking student affairs professionals willing to engage in a series of two semi-structured interviews over Zoom over six weeks. These interviews will begin in September 2024 and conclude before November 2024. The time commitment is as follows:

Interview 1: 60-90 minutes

Interview 2: 60-90 minutes

Transcript review for accuracy: 30-60 minutes

Participants will be selected based on the following criteria:

a. A student affairs professional (as defined by NASPA)

b. Not employed at a Universities of Wisconsin institution

c. Have served as the lead to an institutional response to a student death by suicide

d. Diversity of participants (personal and professional identities, campus and student demographics, etc)

All participant identities and any other identifying information will be kept confidential and only used in aggregated, thematic analysis. An informed consent will be provided and reviewed with each participant. Participation is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without penalty.

To express interest in this study, please click here: SURVEY LINK

I would love to talk to you about your experiences. Additionally, if you are not the correct person at your institution, or if you know of a colleague at another institution who may have valuable insights, please consider forwarding this invitation to participate to them.

Thank you so much for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Kate Demerse

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO COLLEAGUES

Recruitment Email

Dear colleagues,

I am requesting your assistance in identifying individuals who may be interested in my dissertation study. I am looking to recruit participants who are willing to share their experiences of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide in higher education.

I would like to interview participants who:

a) Identify as a student affairs professional (as defined by NASPA)

b) Are not employed at a Universities of Wisconsin institution

c) Have served as the lead to an institutional response to a student death by suicide

If you are willing, could you please forward the information below to a colleague who may fit the participant criteria?

With appreciation,

Kate

APPENDIX C

TARGETED RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Request to participate in dissertation study

* Suicide trigger warning *

Hello,

My name is Kate Demerse. I am currently employed as the Associate Vice Chancellor of Campus Life and Dean of Students at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

I am writing to you to request your participation in my dissertation study.

I have identified you as a potential participant in my dissertation research aimed at exploring the experiences of student affairs practitioners who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide. I believe your campus has experienced a student death by suicide in the recent past and I would like to speak with you about your experience.

This study uses Kolb's experiential learning theory and the concept of secondary trauma as a lens through which to conduct this research. I am seeking student affairs professionals willing to engage in a series of two semi-structured interviews over Zoom over six weeks. These interviews will begin in September 2024 and conclude before December 2024. The time commitment is as follows:

Interview 1: 60-90 minutes

Interview 2: 60-90 minutes

Transcript review for accuracy: 30-60 minutes

Participants will be selected based on the following criteria:

a. A student affairs professional (as defined by NASPA)

b. Not employed at a Universities of Wisconsin institution

c. Have served as the lead to an institutional response to a student death by suicide

d. Diversity of participants (personal and professional identities, campus and student demographics, etc)

All participant identities and any other identifying information will be kept confidential and only used in aggregated, thematic analysis. An informed consent will be provided and reviewed with each participant. Participation is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without penalty.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please click here: SURVEY LINK. I am using this brief Qualtrics survey to gather preliminary participant data to assure my study has broad representation, both professionally and personally.

If you are not the correct person at your institution, or if you know of a colleague at another institution who may have valuable insights, please consider forwarding this invitation to participate to them.

Thank you so much for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Kate Demerse

APPENDIX D

QUALTRICS SURVEY

Qualtrics Survey to Gather Participants

Opening Statement: Welcome and thank you for your interest in my study. The purpose of my study is to learn about the lived experiences of student affairs professions who have led an institutional response to a student death by suicide. My study will require two interviews and a follow-up to confirm the summary of your interviews. Please answer the questions below so that I may screen each interested individual and follow up with you directly. Your answers will be kept confidential. Please note that I may not be able to invite everyone who expresses interest in my study to participate. Thanks for your time.

Question One: Are you or have you been a student affairs profession (as defined by NASPA)?
Yes
No

Question Two: Are you employed at a Universities of Wisconsin institution?
Yes
No

Question Three: Have served as the lead to an institutional response to a student death by suicide?
Yes
No

Question Four: Please select your institution type (select all that apply):

- Public
- Private
- HSI
- HBCU
- PWI
- 4-year
- 2-year
- For profit
- Other

Question Five: Does your institution have residential housing for students?
Yes
No

Question Six: What racial or ethnic groups describe you?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino

- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

Question Seven: What is your gender identity?

Question Eight: Please share your name and pronouns.

Question Nine: Please enter your email here. If you are selected, this email address will be used to contact you to set up interview times.

Post submit message: Thank you for your interest and initial participation in my dissertation study. If selected, I will contact you to set up a first interview. If you are not selected, I will permanently delete all information submitted via this Qualtrics form. If you have questions, please contact me at kdemerse@uwlax.edu.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

First Interview

Prior to this interview, I emailed you a copy of the Informed Consent document, which you electronically signed and emailed back to me. Do you have any questions about the potential risk or benefits of this study?

I will be asking you questions about your experience with responding to a student death by suicide, which may elicit an emotional response. I would like to remind you of your employer's EAP program and the national 988 number.

Research questions:

1. How do study participants describe their experience leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide?
2. How, if at all, do student affairs practitioners experience secondary trauma associated with student death by suicide?
3. How do study participants make meaning of this experience?

The first meeting with each participant will explore the experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide, including things that may have been useful in preparing them for the experience and the impact this had on them.

Prior to asking the first interview question to each participant, I will discuss all sections of the informed consent form. This discussion will include:

- The focus of my project
- My interest in their stories
- The methods I will use to collect data
- The rational and significance of my study
- Issues of confidentiality
- Their rights as a participant in research

Background questions

- Please share a little about yourself and your personal and professional background.
- Please tell me about the campus and student demographic, specific to the campus you were at when you lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

- What inspired you to volunteer to be interviewed for this study?

General questions

- Please describe the overall experience of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide.
- Please share a time you responded to or coordinated the response of a student death by suicide.
- What was the most challenging part of navigating this experience?
    - Probing question: What would have been helpful in working through these challenges?
- Was there anything rewarding about this experience?
- What was the most impactful or memorable part of this experience?
- As a higher education professional, what is the most important lesson you learned from responding to a student death by suicide?
- If you are willing, please share any available demographic information about the student who died by suicide (domestic/international, undergrad/grad, nontrad, parent).

Available training or preparatory work

- What training or education prepared you for this experience?
- Can you describe the process you and your institution follow?

Useful knowledge, skills, and abilities

- What knowledge, skills, or abilities helped prepare you for this experience?

Available self-care or aftercare

- Did you experience any personal impact in responding to the student death by suicide?
- What did you do to support your own well-being during this process?
- Can you describe the experience of institutional response and support?

Interview Two

Student Death Protocols

- Thank you for sharing your protocols/please share your protocols. Did you have a role in drafting this policy?
- Is there anything you would highlight?
- Anything you would like to change?
- How does the process end? How, if at all, is your work acknowledged?

Discuss potential themes developed from the first interview.

APPENDIX F

IRB APPROVALS FROM UW-LA CROSSE

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN LA CROSSE

Research & Sponsored Programs
243 Graff Hall
1725 State Street
La Crosse, WI 54601
608.785.8044
irb@uwlax.edu
www.uwlax.edu/grants

To: Katherine Demerse

From: Katherine Kortenkamp, Coordinator
Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the
Protection of Human Subjects
kkortenkamp@uwlax.edu
608-785-8445

Date June 3, 2024

Re: **RESEARCH PROTOCOL SUBMITTED TO IRB**

The IRB Committee has reviewed your proposed research project entitled: ***"Experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide."*** The Committee has determined that your research protocol will not place human subjects at risk. The attached protocol has been approved and is **exempt** from further review per **45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(iii).**

IRB records should be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the project.

Since you are not seeking federal funding for this research, the review process is complete, and you may proceed with your project. **Major changes to your study or adverse events must be reported via the Attachment C document.**

Good luck with your project!

cc: IRB File, Adele Lozano, Eran Hanke, Rebecca Freer

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN LA CROSSE

Research & Sponsored Programs
243 Graff Hall
1725 State Street
La Crosse, WI 54601
608.785.8044
irb@uwlax.edu
www.uwlax.edu/grants

To: Kate Demerse

From: Katherine Kortenkamp, Coordinator
Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the
Protection of Human Subjects
kkortenkamp@uwlax.edu
608-785-8445

Date: October 16, 2024

Re: **CHANGES TO RESEARCH PROTOCOL SUBMITTED TO IRB_24-KD-367**

The IRB Committee has reviewed your changes to the research project: ***"Experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide."*** Because these changes to your research protocol will place human subjects at minimal risk, it has been approved under the **expedited** review category in accordance with **45CFR46, 46.110 (b)(1)(ii).**

Please remember to provide participants with a copy of the new consent form, and to keep a copy for your records. Consent documentation and IRB records should be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the project.

Continuing review after 12 months is not required for this project. Minor changes or adverse events must be reported via the Attachment C document.

Good luck with your project!

cc: IRB File, Becki Elkins, Rebecca Freer, Eran Hanke, Adele Lozano

APPENDIX G

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Experiences of student affairs professionals who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide.

Principal Investigator: Kate Demerse
2888 Scenic Dr.
Oshkosh, WI 54904
(920) 606-9536

Emergency Contacts: Dr. Adele Lozano

Dr. Becki Elkins
(608) 785-6489 (office)

Purpose and Procedure

1. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of student affairs practitioners who lead institutional responses to a student death by suicide in higher education.
2. I will participate in a series of two interviews lasting 60-90 minutes each.
3. The total time requirement is a maximum of 3 hours over a 6-week period.
4. Interviews will be conducted using the online video conferencing platform Zoom.

Potential Risks

1. Interview questions may cause discomfort or emotional distress
2. Interview questions may feel offensive or interrogative

3. Names of institutions and participants will be protected, but unique experiences and stories shared may hold inherent political, reputational, and career risks

Rights and Confidentiality

1. My participation is voluntary. I may withdraw or decline to answer any question without consequences at any time.

2. I may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty.

3. The results of this study may be published in journals or presented professionally using aggregated or deidentified data only (unidentifiable).

4. All information will be kept confidential using pseudonyms and numbered codes, in a password protected file securely stored in an encrypted drive.

5. All identifying information, including information that may be obtained from direct quotations and data that may identify participants will be removed from all data points including transcripts and field notes.

Potential Benefits

1. My participation in this study may foster feelings of compassion satisfaction.

2. Other higher education professionals, including student affairs practitioners, administrators, and faculty may gain a deeper understanding of how I experience the phenomenon of leading an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

3. My participation in this study contributes to the broader understanding of supporting and retaining the student affairs practitioners who lead an institutional response to a student death by suicide.

Questions regarding study procedures may be directed to the principal investigator, Kate Demerse at kdemerse@uwlax.edu or at (920)606-9536, the dissertation chair, Dr. Adele Lozano, Associate Professor of Student Affairs Administration at the University of

Wisconsin, La Crosse at alozano@eagle.uwlax.edu, or Dr. Becki Elkins, Associate Professor of Student Affairs Administration at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse at belkins@uwlax.edu or (608) 785-6478. Questions regarding the protection of human subjects research may be directed to the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (608) 785-8044 or at irb@uwlax.edu.

Participant_____ Date_____

Researcher_____ Date_____