Grief's Impact on the Educational Experience

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Abstract:

Grief is a multidimensional response to loss that affects emotional, cognitive, physical, and social functioning, yet its impact on college students is often underestimated within higher education. A substantial number of undergraduates experience bereavement or significant non-death losses during their academic careers, and these experiences can impair concentration, motivation, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. As a result, grieving students frequently encounter declines in academic performance, increased absences, and reduced engagement, all of which threaten persistence and retention. Despite these documented effects, many colleges and universities lack formal bereavement policies, grief-informed training for faculty and staff, or structured support systems that address the complex and non-linear nature of grief. Consequently, students often navigate loss with limited guidance and inconsistent accommodations.

This project addresses these gaps by examining current grief-related practices across the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) and by synthesizing existing research on grief literacy and student development. Through an analysis of institutional survey data and a review of relevant literature, the study identifies strengths, inconsistencies, and areas for improvement in campus responses to student grief. These findings inform the development of a research-based framework designed to guide higher education institutions in implementing practical and comprehensive grief support that integrates academic, emotional, and social dimensions of care. By examining grief's influence on student experience and advancing evidence-based interventions, this project contributes to the development of grief-responsive institutional environments that foster student well-being, resilience, and academic achievement.

Acknowledgements:

Trauma creates change you don't choose. Healing is about creating change you do choose.

– Michele Rosenthal

I don't know why I have been viewing the writing of this section, the *acknowledgements*, as though I am crafting a love letter to my children and my family, or as if these words must transcend both me and the work contained in these pages. Perhaps it is because acknowledging what and who inspired this project means acknowledging the journey behind it; the decision to pursue another master's degree, the determination to prove to myself that I could succeed at a Big Ten university at this stage in my life, and the desire to show my children that if they can face the hardest things, then so can I. It is also a way to honor my husband, whose support I deeply respect, and to join him proudly as a fellow UW-Madison alumnus. And it is a way to thank my parents, who have continually pushed me to reach further, try harder, and pursue what matters.