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Student Affairs Professionals' Experiences Supporting Students through a Grief Loss: A Qualitative Study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Educational Leadership &
Higher Education Administration
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of
Doctor of Education

By

Lenora Ann Mitchell

May 2023

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the extraordinary people in my life who have helped me become the woman I am today. First is my family. You are my world, and each day I strive to be an impactful human being in this world where you can be proud. To Bill, Cole, Paige, Brayden, and Brooke, thank you for supporting me tremendously throughout my education journey. Even on the days when it seemed too much to handle, you all reminded me that I was strong enough to persevere. I could not have made it to the end without your unconditional love and support.

To my parents, who smile down on me from above. I have promised both of you to be the best version of myself and do great things. This is just the start. My experiences with the loss of you both have impacted me and once I finally learned how to embrace my grief, I knew I was supposed to do something with it to help others. You both taught me how to influence others' lives in different ways positively. Dad, you taught me how to be a humble and transformational leader. Mom, you taught me what true unconditional love is for your children. You taught me how to be empathetic and fiercely impactful when needed. I hope that with this terminal degree, I will be able to widen my reach and make you proud. I love you both dearly and know I will see you again one day.

Finally, to Karen Troppman, I consider myself one lucky woman to have you come into my life when you did. You were the one who made me want to get out of bed in the morning when my grief was so overwhelming. The kindness you showed me when I felt I was at my lowest was a gift from God. You always spoke to me about faith and showed me what being a mentor truly means. You were kind, you were inspiring, you were my angel on earth. I take all that you gave to me and try to put it back into the world triple fold. I will be eternally grateful for

the days I spent working with you. I have a vision of you sitting right next to my parents on my graduation day.

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the experiences of student affairs administration-prepared (SAAP) professionals' application of knowledge and skills to interact with grieving students and the ways in which their respective SAAP programs prepared them for this work. This study examined (a) the experiences of SAAP professionals supporting a student navigating grief loss at one case study institution and (b) reflections on the application of skills and knowledge gained from their education preparation programs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three full-time SAAP professionals at a single institution, and a comparative analysis of their educational preparation curriculum was conducted. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences supporting students navigating a grief loss. The data from this study provided two major themes as important factors in supporting students in a grief transition: helping skills applied in practice and curricular influences on preparation to assist grieving students. This study also investigated how participants' SAAP education programs prepared them to support students transitioning through a loss. The results indicated that while there are various curricular foci available in SAAP education programs leading to a position as a student affairs professional, there are similarities in their experiences when supporting a student after a death loss. The qualitative research study's findings provide recommendations for course curriculum and professional development opportunities at the case study institution.

Keywords: grief, loss, helping skills, student affairs preparation, student development theory, student transitions

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Chapter 1

As of 2022, many undergraduate college students arriving on campus had experienced losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These ranged from loss of experiences, socialization, rites of passage, and employment to the deaths of loved ones. As of October 2022, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that 1,049,796 deaths had been attributed to COVID-19 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-a). The impact of this period on college students is tremendous, yet they are expected to return to their previous level of functioning. Grief and loss are universal experiences, though we often do not associate them with college students due to the traditional student's age bracket. Given the increased experiences of loss among college students on campus, it is crucial to study how to support the growing population of grieving students.

Hillis et al.'s (2021) research indicated that from April 2020 to June 2021, more than 140,000 children under eighteen suffered from the loss of a parent or caregiver from COVID-19-associated deaths. Tucci and Doka's (2021) call to action, addressing the Shadow Pandemic of Complicated Forms of Grief, is an eye-opening letter to the President of the United States imploring him to educate professionals on the adverse mental and physical consequences of loss correlated with COVID-19. The authors discussed the staggering statistics of the steep increase in people suffering from the grief caused by the pandemic.

Additionally, Varga et al. (2021) found that 35% of undergraduate and 25% of graduate students had experienced a loss within the previous 24 months. While Varga et al.'s (2021) study did not focus on the impact of COVID-19, it did indicate that a substantial percentage of students enrolled in higher education are faced with the task of navigating loss and grief. Students who

are permanently changed by their losses can bolster their ability to be resilient through programs, policies, and nurturing relationships (Hillis et al., 2021).

The primary goal of higher education is to provide post-secondary students with a quality educational experience that allows them to develop into well-rounded citizens. While academics remain the primary focus of higher education, researchers such as Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) have illustrated experiences inside and outside the classroom influence student growth and development. The Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Association (NASPA) (n.d.-b) emphasizes that student learning and development also happen outside of the classroom, and the work done by Student Affairs Administration Prepared (SAAP) professionals significantly contributes to the lifelong journey of students. SAAP professionals are dedicated to student-centered practices that focus on advocacy, social justice, scholarship, and engagement (NASPA, n.d.-a). An essential component to these institutions reaching their goals is to employ knowledgeable staff trained in the core competencies that guide student affairs work in higher education (NASPA, n.d.-b). NASPA (n.d.-b) states that SAAP professionals serve as essential staff whose main objective is to guide problem-solving and improve the student experience at their institutions. SAAP professionals are often employed in student-facing offices and positioned well to identify and support the growing number of students navigating loss.

Peterkin (2012) suggested that student affairs roles have evolved in the various functional areas over the last 20 years, from simply providing student services to a more holistic student development lens. For this study, a functional area will be defined as a person or department which carries out a particular administrative function, such as Residence Life and Housing, Student Conduct, or Campus Recreation. Stark and Mills (2020) indicated the importance of SAAP professionals as their work often requires conversations like those in a therapeutic setting.

Adequate support for grieving students requires SAAP professionals to obtain basic awareness and knowledge of appropriate training programs to help those grieving (Tucci & Doka, 2021).

As the pandemic is nearing its endemic phase, the effects are still prominent, it is crucial for student retention efforts that SAAP professionals are prepared to assist the growing population of students grieving a loss. Parnell et al. (2021) indicated that addressing mental health issues is one of the top three areas of concern for administrators in higher education, and SAAP professionals anticipate an increased responsibility for navigating crisis management and counseling situations for their students in the next five years. Previous scholarly literature has indicated that SAAP professionals may be ill prepared in meeting the needs of higher education's current conditions due, in part, to the last decade's shift away from teaching counseling skills in SAAP programs. Holzweiss and Tolman (2021) highlighted that a rise in mental health issues and a decrease in budgets and staff to assist students will only compound the situation.

For example, Parnell et al. (2021) examined the future of student affairs, focusing on the significant trends in 2021 due to COVID-19. The authors suggested that it is imperative to conduct further research where current practices in student affairs are reexamined in correlation to the fluctuating trends faced by today's students to improve the preparation of future SAAP professionals. Parnell et al.'s (2021) report highlighting the rising number of bereaved students on national campuses justifies higher education institutions requesting faculty, staff, and senior-level administrators to focus on updating SAAP master's program curricula to include crisis management and mental health concerns. Research on SAAP professionals' confidence levels in

their crisis management and counseling support skills would provide critical data to inform Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration programs.

When discussing SAAP professionals, it is essential to understand the educational requirements and specific programs that lead to a SAAP career. There are master's programs with various student affairs concentrations for students who want to enter this field. However, for this research, the focus is on two types of programs that have been offered at the institution where the study will occur: first, the Higher Education Policy and Student Affairs programs which focus on administration, and second, the Higher Education Counseling and Student Affairs programs which require core counseling skills and may be accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The significant differences between the two preparation programs include accreditation and the importance and use of helping skills in the field (D'Arcangelo, 2022).

Research has suggested that in recent years the number of counseling-focused graduate preparation programs has decreased as Higher Education/Student Affairs Administration (HESAA) programs have increased (Ortiz et al., 2015). Protivnak et al. (2013) stated that little to no research had compared the efficacy of each type of academic preparation program outcome for SAAP professionals. The decrease in counseling emphasis programs, coupled with the rise in students' mental health concerns and staff shortages, makes it critical to examine the SAAP professionals' experiences supporting students navigating loss and the necessary preparatory work. This study aimed to understand the experiences of SAAPs supporting grieving students. Understanding their experiences and reflections on applying skills and knowledge learned in

their SAAP preparation programs has implications for improving SAAP's preparedness to meet the rising number of college students grieving a death loss.

Purpose of Study

In this study, I interviewed current SAAP professionals working in student-facing offices and had had the opportunity to support a student navigating a loss. This study aimed to understand the SAAP professionals' reflections on their experiences while supporting grieving students. Specifically, to discover if the training and skills learned in their respective master's preparation programs were helpful in their current career and if they applied skills and knowledge learned to support a student navigating the loss and grief process. This study also added to this area of inquiry by identifying the essential skills and intentional job-based experiences practitioners need to learn in their SAAP graduate programs to be prepared to support grieving students effectively. The research informs SAAP preparation programs, higher education student affairs professional development in all functional areas, and best practices for hiring competent staff.

Students dealing with loss during their higher education experience often feel isolated in an atmosphere primarily geared toward academic and social activity (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019). Challenges include the temptation of unhealthy coping mechanisms, lack of peer support, and, most importantly, distance from their family of origin, which is often their primary support system (Varga et al., 2021). Individuals who report experiencing loss are at risk of various effects, such as lower GPA, feelings of isolation from peers, and adverse physical symptoms, which can lead to an increased likelihood of withdrawal from college (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019). The support systems available to a student while navigating a loss are critical to their

ability to thrive. If they do not receive support or assistance from their university, the potential for attrition dramatically increases (Balk, 2001).

Rationale of Study

Past studies have looked at various aspects of the student affairs profession, including the preparation, competencies, impact of SAAP professionals, mechanisms to support bereaved college students, and factors that lead to student attrition or retention in higher education (Balk, 2001; Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2019; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). This qualitative case study differentiated itself from others by examining the experiences of SAAP professionals supporting grieving students through emphasizing the skills and knowledge they utilized during those moments of support and the level of preparedness they attributed to their educational programs. This process allowed me to highlight the skills and knowledge SAAP professionals utilized and needed during those moments of support and the level of preparedness practitioners associated with their educational programs and professional development experiences.

The role of SAAP professionals has dramatically evolved over the years. They fulfill many different roles at institutions and have varying levels of direct interaction with students in a typical workday. Stark and Mills (2020) insist that SAAP professionals' application of counseling techniques should be a fundamental part of their professional scope. Stark and Mills' (2020) research indicated that SAAP professionals rated counseling skills as indispensable or essential overall but stated that newer student affairs preparation programs lack emphasis on counseling techniques. Ortiz et al. (2015) identified that the SAAP curriculum shifted from counseling to a managerial and administrative focus. Holweiss and Tollman (2021) indicated that

higher education preparation program administrators are pressured to streamline the curriculum to reduce costs and remain competitive.

Student Affairs graduate preparation programs strive to create a curriculum that reduces the number of elective courses offered while focusing on enrollment numbers, institutional policies, and diversity standards (Holweiss & Tollman, 2021). The same researchers added that while enrollment in student affairs programs has increased, the foundational coursework has stayed stagnant, and professional competency opportunities have become more complicated as the number of program credit hours has declined. The imbalance created by reducing content and credit hours increases undue stress on the faculty in these programs and results in SAAP professionals who enter the field with deficient skills for student support. The return to campus in the post-COVID-19 era is the perfect time to research lived experiences of SAAP professionals because university students are a population vulnerable to the onset of common mental health problems that could negatively affect their higher education careers (Krifa et al., 2022). Examining the experiences of different student affairs professionals supporting students navigating a grief loss will aid in informing SAAP preparation programs.

Problem Statement

Experiencing the loss of a close friend or family member is an inevitable part of life and can impact one's life in numerous ways. Balk et al. (2010) estimated that 40% of higher education students have experienced the death of a friend or relative before age 18. Common grief reactions include anger, denial, sadness, anxiety, and longing for the deceased person (Balk et al., 2010). College administrators, faculty, SAAP professionals, and counselors are under increased pressure to provide holistic support for students, which includes the social, emotional,

physical, mental, and intellectual realms. Failure to recognize the impact of the loss may put the institution at risk for student attrition (Balk et al., 2010).

A review and update of the SAAP professional education preparation requirements is essential to have a workforce ready to meet the needs of today's college students. Student affairs professionals' diversity of roles and functions prohibits creating a particular pathway to working in this field (McGill et al., 2021). Lovell and Kosten (2000) indicated that any profession with a long history, like student affairs, should be able to determine the skills, knowledge, and traits needed to succeed in their respective roles. The demand for additional research on the skills, knowledge, and traits is crucial to student affairs practice informing SAAP preparation program curricula. The findings of this study contributed to the area of job preparedness of SAAP professionals. The data indicated SAAP professionals' confidence in their skills and preparation to help grieving students during a transitional time in their lives and informed those who prepare SAAP professionals about the skills needed in the field.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of student affairs administration master's prepared professionals at a Mid-Atlantic university supporting students who are navigating a grief loss?
2. How do the same student affairs-prepared professionals apply skills and knowledge gained in their graduate programs to assist students navigating a grief loss?

Significance of Methods

This study used a qualitative case study research design to examine the perspectives of SAAP professionals who have supported bereaved students. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), a case study is the collection of data that provides the researcher with an in-

depth exploration of a bounded system which can include individuals, events, or processes. This study examined the first-hand accounts of the support processes from SAAP professionals by interviewing three respondents at one institution, drawing out subjective interpretations, and capturing an individualized frame of reference (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). When it comes to death, each student's experience is unique. Varga et al. (2021) stated that assessments of individual experiences would help SAAP professionals understand the difficulty a student may be experiencing from a loss. Therefore, a qualitative case study design allowed the researcher to identify themes in the experiences of three SAAP professionals at a large public institution in the Mid-Atlantic region in supporting students dealing with a loss and their ability to apply skills and knowledge gained in their graduate programs to assist these students.

Significance of Study

Although past studies have examined college student bereavement and the preparation of SAAP professionals, this study aimed to combine both research topics by identifying prominent themes from participants' experiences with supporting students navigating a loss. This study differentiated itself from others by providing insight into the SAAP professionals' experiences supporting students and examining how SAAP professionals applied skills and training learned in their educational preparation program. The SAAP professional can also identify additional factors, such as individual beliefs and values, which may impact communication between the student and the support professional. This perspective offers insight to the student affairs division in understanding the experiences and preparation of SAAP staff employed at a Mid-Atlantic university and their educational training and professional development needs.

This study was significant as there is a need for further in-depth research into the educational preparation of SAAP professionals. Cuyjet et al. (2009) stated that there is continued

debate among administrators about what knowledge and skills SAAP professional graduates need to succeed in the profession. This research could lead to an increased understanding of the confidence levels SAAP professionals have when applying the skills, they have learned in real-life situations supporting grieving students. Reynolds (2013) insists that the experiences of SAAP professionals will provide essential evidence of the skills and knowledge necessary to be effective advocates. Research illuminating the impact of the helping relationship with grieving students could aid in informing more effective educational programs for SAAP professionals and support programs for students suffering from grief.

Positionality

I am a 50-year-old woman who identifies as a mother, wife, empathic educator, only child, adult orphan and a SAAP professional. I am uniquely qualified to conduct this study as I have been on both sides of the grief navigation process. I navigated the grief process as a nontraditional undergraduate student in 2011 when I lost my mother to pancreatic cancer. I am also a SAAP professional who worked in a student-facing office for seven years and a graduate of a CACREP Accredited counseling emphasis SAAP program. The knowledge and skills I have gained from my lived experiences and intersectionality informed my choice of this dissertation topic. I firmly believe that further research connecting two crucial topics needs to be conducted: preparing student affairs educators and supporting bereaved college students. I speak from experience with grief and supporting the bereaved and hope this research will contribute to a more impactful preparation of SAAPs to meet a growing need.

My experiences as a grieving student opened my eyes to the true impact of positive support from a staff member. My parents were 64 years old when they passed, and I was thirty-eight when I became an adult orphan. I felt lost, angry, and alone. Grief consumed me for quite

some time, and the negativity I felt was immense. In my experience, navigating a loss is as unique as the individual it affects. The time needed to facilitate the grief process can vary from situation to situation. All higher education programs do, however, run on a time constraint. The definitive semester timeline could hamper the bereavement process if a student is enrolled during a loss period. The long-term outcome could depend on the individual's mental health, relationship strength with the deceased, social support, and the current healing atmosphere. All those contributing factors of grief must be considered when working with bereaved students.

During my difficult time of grief, exceptionally supportive guidance was given to me by a woman who I considered an angel on Earth who helped me see positivity again. That angel's name was Karen, and she made a massive difference in my life. She threw me the life preserver I desperately needed when I was drowning in grief. She encouraged me to find the strength to get out of bed to complete the academic program I had started. She collaborated with me to complete my academics while talking to me about faith and the mysteries of life. I learned great lessons in empathy, patience, and servant leadership from Karen and my experiences with grief. I want to do the same for others as Karen did for me. I have since had the opportunity to make the same type of impact in times of transition for students in my SAAP professional and educator roles. Those encounters have reconfirmed my beliefs and pushed me to dedicate this study to enhancing the future of educational programs and student support. I cherish the time I have spent working with those students because I can connect with some of the thoughts and feelings they are experiencing, and I understand how impactful my knowledge and skills can be in those times of need. I recognize that my experiences have developed into a passion for this topic. I have

engaged in reflexivity and analytic memoing to mitigate any researcher bias in my data collection and analysis.

Definition of Terms

- **SAAP professional:** A student affairs administration prepared professional is a university employee whose primary function is to provide student services within an institution (NASPA, n.d.-b).
- **Functional Area:** a person or department which carries out a particular administrative function (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a.).
- **Bereaved/Bereavement:** The state of losing someone with whom one has had a close relationship through death. This state includes a range of grief and mourning responses (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
- **Grief:** refers to a personal experience of loss which can include physical or emotional symptoms (Balk, 2001).
- **Loss:** the harm or privation resulting from losing or being separated from someone or something (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b)

Summary

Students in higher education programs who are grieving have multiple supports available in the academic and student affairs realms. Evidence-based educational preparation programs for SAAP professionals are critical to successful student support. As the college demographic grows in diversity, there is a need to re-examine the importance of helping skills taught in the SAAP preparation programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the rise in the percentage of grieving college students and the prevalence of their need for support. This study attempted to learn how SAAP professionals applied the skills and knowledge learned in their student affairs

preparation programs and the importance of specific skills when supporting bereaved students. This dissertation examines individualized accounts of SAAP professionals supporting students grieving a loss through a qualitative case study to identify themes that will provide data that can contribute to improving educational preparation programs and students served by their graduates.

Chapter two will provide a literature review, which includes an overview of the impact of grief in higher education and the support systems that bereaved students seek. The following section will examine the roles of SAAP professionals, the importance of out-of-classroom (OOC) experiences led by SAAP professionals, and an overview of educational preparation programs. These topics will be followed by literature supporting the tensions surrounding the inclusion of helping skills training and knowledge in SAAP preparation programs. The chapter will conclude with the theoretical framework applied to the data collected in this study.

Chapter 2

This study aimed to understand the experiences of Student Affairs Administration Prepared (SAAP) professionals who have helped grieving students, precisely the skills and knowledge they used, and whether those techniques were learned in their respective SAAP programs. Specifically, this study examined (a) the experiences of SAAP professionals supporting a student navigating grief loss at one case study institution and (b) reflections on the applying skills and knowledge gained from their education preparation programs. The chapter ends with the theoretical framework used to understand the data collected in this qualitative study.

Impact of Grief and Loss in Higher Education

Balk et al.'s (2010) study indicated that 22% to 30% of college students were within their first year of bereavement. Culpit et al. (2022) indicated that roughly one-third of the average college student body would suffer the loss of an individual connected to them within twelve months, which rises to about one-half within twenty-four months. The unprecedented number of deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the rise in bereaved college students. High COVID-19 mortality rates may have severe unrecognized consequences, such as the large-scale death of students' immediate family members, such as parents (Hillis et al., 2021). According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the number of deaths had increased to 1,066,351 as of November 2022 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d. -b). A loss may contribute to a long-term negative impact on health and well-being.

Grief is a normal process and a natural reaction to all types of losses. Grief can affect a student's cognitive-behavioral, physical, spiritual, and interpersonal functioning (Balk, 2001). Fagenbaum et al. (2012) stated that students might not feel they can talk about their emotions

and may turn to harmful coping mechanisms like alcohol and drug use which are already an issue on many college campuses. Auerbach et al.'s (2016) research indicated that experiencing psychological distress is a widespread problem in higher education, and students are at risk of developing mental health problems at a rate of 3:1 when compared to the general population. As the number of mental health issues rises among college students, the importance of addressing these grief symptoms also increases (Varga et al., 2021).

Students navigating loss tend to struggle with academics and interpersonal interactions, which are central to the college experience (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). Factors such as lower GPA, feelings of isolation from peers, and adverse physical symptoms can lead to an increase of attrition (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019). Bereaved students are susceptible to experiencing difficulties managing the grief process due to several factors that include rigid academic demands, geographical distance from home and their nuclear support system, lack of proper support systems from peers or the institution and being immersed in an environment that is associated with fun and exciting experiences (Fagenbaum et al., 2012).

While students can utilize various available supports, the campus environment plays a critical role in developing help-seeking behaviors (Fagenbaum et al., 2012). Undergraduate students often navigate college life without the necessary information or resources to manage loss and grief, and institutions must provide more effective support to bereaved students (Fagenbaum et al., 2012). The individuality of loss and grief is significant; not all students will need professional counseling support. Because grief can manifest in students in many ways, higher education faculty, staff, and counseling support must identify the possible effects to provide adequate support. SAAP professionals employed in student services offices are often the first to notice the physiological or psychological effects of grief in a student (Liew & Servaty-

Sieb, 2019). Accurately identifying the causes of a student's maladaptive behavior can aid in determining effective support methods (Varga et al., 2021). SAAP professionals are well-positioned to aid those students who need more than a peer's support but whose needs do not rise to the level of formal counseling.

Support Systems Sought by the Bereaved

In relation to this study, it is essential to understand that 11.2% of college students present with grief and loss problems in counseling centers (AUCCCD, 2021). Additionally, the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) ranked grief/loss issues twelfth on a list of the sixteen most significant issues for seeking help from a counseling center among college students. While there is an expected increase in the percentage of students using counseling services, the director's report also indicated that staff turnover is a concern. The AUCCCD (2021) indicated that almost 60% of counseling centers are experiencing a turnover of one or more positions, and 70% are experiencing difficulties recruiting new employees. These statistics support Auerbach et al.'s (2018) research stating college campuses have difficulty meeting the increased demand for counseling services due to a lack of resources. Therefore, SAAP professionals must seize the moments students spend outside the classroom to help them in their time of need and promote student success (NASPA, n.d.-b).

Oswalt et al. (2020) reported that the increase in higher education students seeking counseling services was more than five times the growth rate of institutional enrollment. The AUCCCD 2021 Directors Report indicated a fluctuation of trends over the last several years due to COVID and expected that the return to in-person learning would increase the utilization rates of counseling centers. As mental health issues continue to increase due to the aftermath of

COVID-19, it is imperative to examine current SAAP professionals' experiences applying their knowledge and skills to assisting grieving students.

While many institutions offer support services through counseling centers, research suggests that only some students experiencing a loss will actively access services due to a lack of awareness of campus services or their own needs (Cox et al., 2015). Cox et al. (2015) collected longitudinal data on psychological service usage rates by grieving and non-grieving students at various institutions. Of the 117 students who reported a recent loss, 21.4% reported long-term effects within their academic, social, physical, and psychological spheres. Roughly half of the bereaved students reported having one or more barriers to utilizing the services offered at the counseling center. However, only four percent of students reported utilizing psychological services on campus (Cox et al., 2015).

Additionally, one-quarter of students reported not knowing that services were available, and fewer than half of those who experienced a loss could correctly identify services (Cox et al., 2015). Other commonly referenced barriers included needing more time for counseling sessions during their academic day, not thinking the services would be helpful, and not knowing how to access them. A small portion of students, around five percent, reported that they avoided the services because they did not want their peers to think less of them (Cox et al., 2015). Students on campus falsely assume counseling services are not beneficial for navigating a loss or believe they do not need such an intervention (Cox et al., 2015). Traditional outreach efforts designed to increase awareness of available services are likely to have only limited effect when administrators at campus counseling centers feel stretched due to the increase in the number and severity of mental health issues among students (Cox et al., 2015). Therefore, SAAP

professionals have an opportunity to bridge the gap between the student and the services available.

Cousins et al.'s (2017) quantitative study of 225 bereaved and nonbereaved students examined the coping-related predictors of academic, social, personal, and institutional attachment domains of college adjustment. The study indicated that peer support was positively associated with academic and social adjustment and institutional attachment. An implication of practice through Cousins et al.'s (2017) study is the institutional need to consider the connection between family and peer support. The study indicated an increased need to relate to a family support system to cultivate the connection of a bereaved student with peers. Similarly, Balk (2001) stated that institutions that actively support students managing grief benefit as dedicated roles and procedures convey that the loss is recognized.

Cousins et al. (2017) inferred that SAAP professionals develop consistent and clear communication methods with parents of grieving students on the importance of support during the grieving process. Despite Cousins et al.'s (2017) study, research indicates that minimal research exists on bereaved college students' perceptions of the social support provided by family members and peers (Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2018). Additionally, limited literature exists on how grieving students benefit from SAAP professionals' support. Gaining a deeper understanding of the effects of grief on college students is essential in ensuring these practitioners are prepared to deliver the support students need as they move through their grief process (Varga et al., 2021). Martin and McGee (2014) emphasized the importance of learning from the experiences of SAAP professionals who have practiced supporting bereaved students. The following section will

provide an overview of the student affairs profession and education preparation to understand the responsibilities and importance of SAAP professionals' positionality on college campuses.

Student Affairs Administration (SAAP) Professionals Roles and Skills

In 1937, The American Council on Education Studies published the *Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)* statement, which listed the duties of student personnel services professionals. These duties included educational counseling, vocational counseling, student health services, administrative duties, and social programs (American Council on Higher Education Studies, 1937). For nearly 85 years, SAAP professionals' duties have been similar to those in the *SPPV*. The work of SAAP professionals encompasses enhancing students' focus on their academics and personal growth in both the cognitive and emotional realms (Ludeman et al., 2009). Martin and McGee (2014) argued that student affairs practitioners should focus on the student beyond intellectual growth to include all aspects that contribute to developing a well-rounded citizen.

According to the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Association, also known as NASPA, student affairs professionals strive to serve the inclusive needs of the student community (NASPA, n.d.-a). This interdisciplinary field of student affairs contains positions that focus on administrative tasks geared toward direct student assistance outside the traditional classroom learning environment (Best College Reviews, October 2022). SAAP professionals' duties range from advising and counseling individuals to coordinating large-scale events, crisis intervention, and case management (Mullen et al., 2018). The influence of SAAP professionals is parallel to that of faculty in terms of positive impact and student development, and they often work in conjunction with academic affairs (Holzweiss & Tolman, 2021). Martin and McGee's (2014) research indicated that student affairs professionals positively impact students' growth in

attitude-based outcomes, motivation, and curiosity, which leads to student success. NASPA (n.d-b.) recognizes that student affairs' contribution to student learning happens through "out of class" (OOC) experiences that can occur anywhere on campus and are equally as crucial to the college experiences inside a classroom.

Out of Class Experiences

Many SAAP professionals will attest that the classroom is not the only space where students learn and grow. Terenzini et al. (1996) referred to OOC experiences as structured or unstructured programs or groups that are not considered a part of an institution's formal instructional process. Most of these programs are organized and supervised by SAAP professionals, indicating that the OOC programs and group activities are just as beneficial as classroom learning when examining the holistic student experiences in college (Martin & McGee, 2014).

Out-of-class experiences, such as residential living, leadership programs, and first-year experiences, have been identified as high-impact practices that provide positive student benefits (Martin & McGee, 2014). According to Martin and McGee (2014), research has identified how peer and faculty interactions impact student development, yet there must be more research on the direct relationship between SAAP professionals' impact on student development. Cuyjet et al. (2009) recommended that SAAP professionals learn a wide range of skills, including counseling, to meet students' needs effectively. While few studies have researched the essential helping skills

needed in student affairs practice (Reynolds, 2011), it is increasingly evident that SAAP professionals perceive the knowledge and use of helping skills as critical (Stark & Mills, 2020).

Helping Skills in Demand

Parnell et al.'s (2021) Compass Report, derived from a yearlong project to identify trends and issues that could affect SAAP Professionals, indicated that students returning to campus post-pandemic have a greater need for mental health support. Seventy percent of the SAAP professional respondents anticipated increased responsibilities to handle mental health issues and crisis management situations. Additionally, 50% of the same respondents expected an increased responsibility for counseling-type interactions with students (Parnell et al., 2021). Only 49% of the SAAP professionals who participated in the project felt they were adequately prepared to counsel students in crisis. The respondents also stated that their campus recognized the rising trend in mental health concerns, and the educators in the preparation programs must create curricula that meet the needs of this current state. This study examines the SAAP professionals' confidence in their preparation to understand and support the needs of grieving students.

Graduate Preparation Programs in Student Affairs

Ortiz et al.'s (2015) review of NASPA's graduate program directory identified an average of 142 programs dedicated to student affairs preparation in the United States. The purpose of graduate preparation programs is to teach students about the scope of knowledge and skills necessary to utilize theoretical foundations of higher education and student affairs in practice (Perez & Haley, 2021). The principal job responsibility of SAAP professionals is to understand and utilize student development theory to meet students' needs within their functional area (Killam & Degges-White, 2017). Most SAAP professionals are expected to use student development theories to guide their role in student engagement, learning, and persistence

(Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). This expectation is legitimate, but the diversity of emphasis among SAAP educational curricula from various graduate programs may not provide practitioners with the skills and knowledge base necessary to meet the students' needs.

The central mission of student affairs is to facilitate and contribute to the development and welfare of the students. The variety of roles and functional areas within the field exacerbates the difficulties in uniting all practitioners under the umbrella identity of student affairs (McGill et al., 2021). According to McGill et al. (2021), this issue can be attributed to the different focuses of educational programs: counseling skills and administrative functions. Though the purpose of this study is not to compare the educational preparation of the interviewees, it is essential to have a basic understanding of the two most typical paths to positions in student affairs. The next section briefly describes the differences between counseling and administrative emphasis in SAAP master's programs.

Administration emphasis student affairs preparation programs may specialize in policy, administration, leadership, and student development. In recent years, the rate of graduates from student affairs programs has risen from 25% to 75%, while enrollment in counselor-focused programs has decreased (Ortiz et al., 2015). Many of the classes in a stand-alone administration emphasis higher education student affairs program focus on the general ability of their graduates to refer students to resources located on and off-campus, versus teaching SAAP professionals' skills to offer the support directly. Adams et al.'s (2014) research on Student Affairs Case Management model highlights the benefits of referral processes during the crisis management interventions taken post-Virginia Tech massacre. The authors note that while case management's origin is social work practice, there is a benefit to this in higher education, particularly in student affairs (Adams et al., 2014). It could be beneficial for higher education institutions to adapt

concepts such as case management models to higher education preparation programs. The benefit to college campuses adapting to this type of structure is that all staff can serve more students in resolving academic, social, and personal issues (Adams et al., 2014). Additionally, case management models align with Student Affairs' foundations in establishing policies and programs that support students.

The most notable shift in SAAP curricula is the streamlining of courses to meet the needs of today's students, resulting in shorter programs and a compacted curriculum (Ortiz et al., 2015). Based on a brief review of the NASPA directory of programs, these programs may require as few as 30 credit hours and as many as 48. The shift in curricula reflects the current trends in higher education to produce more graduates which leads to more profit for the institutions in less time, and the need to accommodate the supply versus demand issue with SAAP staff (Ortiz et al., 2015). This may have contributed to the reduction of counseling skills in the last decade (Stark & Mills, 2020).

Counseling emphasis student affairs programs focus on basic helping skills and counseling theories, techniques, and applications in college and career counseling settings. Within this category, there may be student affairs preparation programs that emphasize helping skills and those that emphasize a counselor identity with a specialty in student affairs/college counseling. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) often accredits the latter as a counseling specialty. Counseling skills emphasis programs tend to require more credit hours than administration emphasis programs; typically, 48 credits at the lower end and up to 60 credits if they are CACREP accredited. As a result, the difference in credit hours reflects the shift from counseling-focused programs to primarily administrative curricula (Ortiz et al., 2015). This shift from counseling emphasis programs to

shorter administration-oriented degrees has coincided with the rise in the mental health needs of college students. Therefore, graduates from administration-oriented student affairs programs may not have knowledge or training in helping skills, crisis intervention, or intervention techniques specific to loss and grief (Reynolds, 2011).

Tensions Around Helping Skills in Student Affairs Preparation Programs

All SAAP professionals are expected to be able to meet the foundational outcomes of the professional competency areas that define the skills, knowledge, and school of thought of the student affairs field (NASPA, n.d.-a). This expectation is standard regardless of the educational path that brought them to the profession. SAAP professionals come from various backgrounds, and no specific “Student Affairs” degree is required to enter the field. For over 50 years, student affairs educators and professionals have debated the appropriate content and practice in education preparation programs to adequately meet learning objectives in competency and skills (Herdlein, 2004).

The variety of roles and responsibilities needed in the field of student affairs presents an obstacle to graduate preparation programs. Student affairs' diverse nature with housing multiple functional areas prohibits developing a standard program similar to traditional professions like business administration. McGill et al. (2021) stated the increase of institutional interblended roles decreases a key characteristic of professionals which is a specialized body of knowledge. The authors also imply that a dedicated body of knowledge in student affairs has been problematic due to the lack of explicit field boundaries. It is nearly impossible to require a specific degree to fit each criterion for each functional area (McGill et al., 2021). The lack of consistency among SAAP professionals' roles and responsibilities prohibits the field from creating a single pathway to the profession. While there is no disciplinary consensus as to one

educational focus to which higher education professionals agree, there are fundamental competencies and standards of practice.

A primary example of the tensions surrounding student affairs education preparation is the division within the professional community concerning the need for counseling skills. Holzweiss and Tolman (2021) indicated that SAAP programs that do not have counseling skills as a requirement in their curriculum lack essential interpersonal relationship-building skills. These same researchers also discussed common themes in SAAP programs missing the necessary curriculum to meet the needs of the higher education workplace, including assisting students with mental health issues. The current study aimed to understand the experiences of SAAP professionals' application of skills and knowledge to support grieving students and their reflections on how their training prepared them to take on the task. Interview questions in this study were developed to examine SAAP professionals' perceptions of their educational preparation to understand any tensions surrounding competence levels that may have been uncovered during the support process.

The Need for Counseling Skills in Student Affairs

Reynolds (2011) stated that SAAP professionals spend a sizable amount of time attending to the needs of distressed students facing mental health issues. The increase in student mental health issues may have a considerable impact on overlaid counseling center staff and SAAP professionals' ability to provide adequate support services, as they are often on the front lines of dealing with student behavioral problems (Kitzrow, 2009). Reynolds (2011) indicated that even though SAAP professionals are not trained as counselors, they often support students in making important life decisions. SAAP professionals have frequent opportunities to provide support

through their student-facing roles and are viewed as accessible and approachable by students with a wide range of issues (Reynolds, 2011).

Reynolds (2011) conducted three rounds of a Delphi study on entry-level and mid-level SAAP professionals to explore their perceptions of essential knowledge and skills needed to support students. This study aimed to provide insight into the consensus of the most critical helping skills and experiences that have enhanced the practitioners' competence levels. The results showed that participants identified 28 core helping skills. Many were traditional micro skills, such as active listening, paraphrasing, and reflecting, which assist in rapport building and begin the therapeutic process. Figure 1 depicts Ivey et al.'s (2010) basic attending skills portion within the Microskills Hierarchy focused on the fundamental helping skills mentioned in this study. Basic attending skills in the bottom portion of the hierarchy are effective methods of constructive communication. This reinforces an increased need to focus on the core helping skills SAAP professionals use to provide relevant education and training. The participants identified more advanced helping skills as essential such as conflict mediation and crisis intervention. The data also identified essential personal traits such as empathy, patience, and genuineness as essential for SAAPs (Reynolds, 2011).

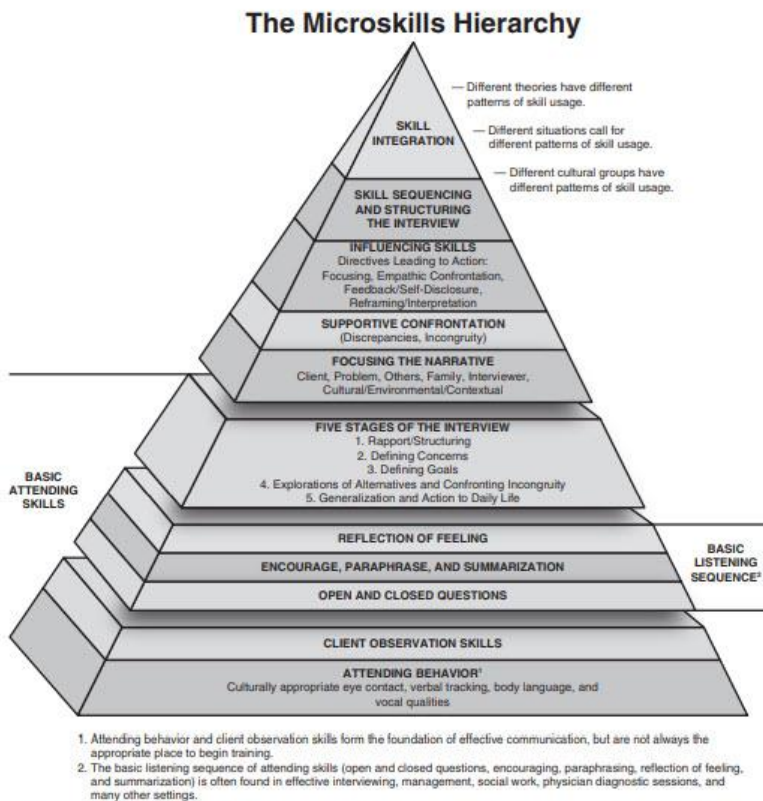
Figure 1*Ivey et al.'s Microskills Hierarchy Foundational Levels*

FIGURE 1. The Microskills Hierarchy. Copyright 2015, 2018 Allen E. Ivey, 8877 Bloomfield Blvd, Sarasota, FL 34238

Note. The Microskills Hierarchy. From *Basic Attending Skills: Foundations of Empathetic Relationships and Problem Solving* (6th ed., p. 8), by Ivey et al., 2010, Brooks/Cole. Copyright 2015 by Allen E. Ivey. Reprinted with permission.

Future research should consider the limitations Reynolds (2011) mentioned, which included the course offerings in SAAP preparation programs, and the increased mental health issues students face on college campuses. There is a long-standing relationship between student affairs and the counseling profession. However, there needs to be unity in preparing professionals to assist students in one-to-one or group settings. Stark and Mills (2020) stated that newer student affairs training programs lack emphasis on counseling techniques and are geared

more towards administrative functions. These graduate preparation programs offer a variety of courses, and those without training in helping skills may not meet the current needs on campus.

Like Reynolds (2011), Protivnak et al. (2013) argued the benefits of training SAAP professionals in counseling knowledge and skills to respond to student issues. Protivnak et al.'s article (2013) examined the Council of the Advancement for Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards in comparison with the CACREP standards. It aimed to categorize functional areas in student affairs based on the perceived value of counselor preparation. Protivnak et al.'s (2013) research indicated that ACPA's (2010) 2010-2012 Directory of Graduate Programs Preparing Student Affairs Professionals listed 153 universities offering student affairs graduate programs, while the Directory of Counselor Preparation Manual sponsored by the National Board of Certified Counselors listed 45 universities offering counseling-based programs. These statistics reveal that approximately one-third of student affairs preparation programs identified as counseling based. This number is concerning as Cuyjet et al.'s (2009) previous research implied that educational preparation in counseling skills is essential for entry-level tasks for SAAP professionals.

Protivnak et al. (2013) stated that student affairs and counselor education graduates might have different opinions on the inclusion of counseling training in preparing new professionals. The difference in opinion may be due to the growing number of diverse functional areas that require professionals to be competent in various tasks. The authors gathered categorical data on the extent to which counseling skills were crucial in specific functional areas by reviewing the CACREP (2009) and CAS (2012) standards. The counseling skills were categorized as *indispensable*, *important*, *helpful*, or *unnecessary* in functional areas and created in conjunction with student affairs and counseling research, highlighting the importance of counseling

knowledge (Protivnak et al., 2013). Two offices identified counseling skills as *indispensable*: Counseling Services and Career Services. The article examined the differences in state licensure requirements based on semester hours which aligns with the variation of education requirements for SAAP professionals.

Several listed offices considered counseling skills *important* (Protivnak et al., 2013). These offices included Housing & Residence Life, Student Conduct, Learning Assistance Programs, and Health & Wellness. While these skills are considered important in these functional areas, they do not require the employees to hold a counseling graduate degree. CAS recommends that the SAAP professional hold a degree relevant to their functional area and position (Protivnak et al., 2013). SAAP professionals in any of these offices can encounter students experiencing a critical incident that requires skills and knowledge to prepare and protect them from any due harm. Counseling knowledge and skills help SAAP professionals understand human development, mediation, and behavior change techniques when working with students in a heightened state of emotions (Protivnak et al., 2013).

The remainder of the offices that listed counseling skills as *helpful or unnecessary* still reported benefits from counseling training. Protivnak et al.'s (2013) example of Undergraduate Admissions services shows that while these professionals have been called "admissions counselors" in the past, they have not been required to have a counseling degree. However, the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) encourages hiring employees with counseling skills and knowledge. This school of thought seems to be consistent with other functional area associations. The authors suggested future studies examine various student affairs functional areas and provide an in-depth account of the importance of counselor education preparation and skill development. Stark and Mills (2020) created a study based on Protivnak et

al.'s (2013) conceptual article to confirm the original findings of the perceptions of SAAP professionals in six functional areas.

The purpose of Stark and Mills' (2020) sequential mixed-methods study was to examine the perceptions of 60 SAAP professionals across six functional areas on their usage of counseling skills in student affairs work. Stark and Mills (2020) referenced SAAP professionals' counseling work as "helping or human relations" skills that help bridge the gap to more formal counseling on campus. The researchers used a quantitative-to-qualitative design to answer questions focused on the importance of counseling skills in student affairs and the use of these skills in their respective roles. The design used stratified sampling to send an initial survey to the 60 respondents, followed by an interview with five individuals. This design choice allowed the researchers to compare participant responses in the various functional areas and gain in-depth data on settings and context. SAAP professionals in this study reported counseling skills as indispensable or essential.

The initial survey indicated that 48.3% of the respondents reported learning their helping skills from their graduate preparation program, and interestingly 25% reported no formal training in helping skills (Stark & Mills 2020). The findings indicated that 68.3% of the participants felt that counseling skills were *indispensable*, and another 23.3% reported them as *important*. In 40 responses, SAAP professionals applied counseling skills to advisement, mentorship, student leadership, and crisis management tasks. An essential difference between Stark and Mill's (2020) and Protivnak et al.'s (2013) work was the opinion within the functional areas on counseling skills being *indispensable and important*. For example, Protivnak et al.'s (2013) study, Residence Life and Housing and Student Conduct listed categorizing counseling skills as *important*, while Stark and Mills (2020) study found 83.3% of respondents in these offices listed

them as *indispensable*. Stark and Mills (2020) found Greek Life and Admissions to be another contradiction. Protivnak et al. (2013) reported helping skills as *helpful* in these functional areas, while Stark and Mill's (2020) data reported that 100% of Greek Life and 84% of Admissions respondents rated them *indispensable or important*.

The qualitative portion of Stark and Mills' (2020) study provided detailed insight into why the findings contrast with those of Protivnak et al. (2013). The researchers reported that counseling skills such as listening, mentoring, and goal setting were among the most frequently mentioned in this study phase. SAAP professionals reported counseling skills in group and one-to-one settings to support students through their respective situations. The implications from Stark and Mill's (2020) study suggest the need for SAAP professionals to possess a higher level of helping skills. Notably, while student affairs professionals must have adequate skills to engage in therapeutic-type support conversations, they do not serve as licensed mental health counselors.

There is a tension between the vocabulary that describes the competencies and standards provided by CAS (2015) and NASPA/ACPA (2015) and the attempt to distinguish between counselors and SAAP professionals. NASPA/ACPA (2015) suggested using the term *supporting* as an essential competency rather than *helping or counseling* and claimed this is the better vocabulary to distinguish the role of a SAAP professional. It is apparent that SAAP professionals may serve in a support situation that requires counseling skills at any time due to their accessibility to students (Stark & Mills, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable for SAAP professionals, who are often well-positioned for student-facing interactions, to rely on their graduate preparation program as the foundation for learning and refining helping skills.

Stark and Mills (2020) stated that their research confirms findings from other studies, such as Reynolds (2011), that indicated that student affairs graduate preparation programs have a

vital role in successfully applying counseling skills. While Stark and Mills (2020) could not ascertain if their participants' education preparation programs were counseling-related, they confirmed the value of counseling skills among SAAP professionals. There is a need for counseling skills across all functional areas. However, Reynolds (2011) indicated that the increased number of stand-alone student affairs programs offer only one counseling-related course that may not address the increase in unique issues on college campuses. "In short, whether a practitioner is described as a provider of services or a student affairs educator, a mastery of counseling skills is an essential attribute for successful practice" (Stark & Mills, 2020, p.123). The last decade has seen a rise in programs with fewer helping skills in their curriculum, a rise in grieving students who prefer to seek non-professional counseling support, and an increasing issue with counseling centers being understaffed and overwhelmed; therefore, it is time to prepare SAAP professionals to assist in meeting the needs of grieving students.

The current study builds on the work of Stark and Mills by taking a closer look at the experiences of SAAP professionals and their perceptions of their educational preparation to meet grieving students' needs in higher education. Professionals employed in the SAAP field who do not have training in helping skills may be inadequately prepared to assist specialized student populations, such as those with mental health issues or grieving a loss. According to Balk (2001), institutional investment in human resources, such as SAAPs, whose responsibility is to support students, is a potent tool to help bereaved college students regain a sense of personal control to help in the retention and persistence of this population.

Researching the experiences of master's level SAAP staff who have supported students grieving a loss is necessary to determine the essential skills needed to engage students, assist in navigating a situation, and identify paths to student success and retention (Stark & Mills, 2020).

A part of ensuring successful student support from these individuals would include helping skills training focused on theoretical knowledge, proper skills, and attributes (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). Although this study does not investigate the fundamental knowledge of student affairs practice, applying skills and theories taught in preparation programs is crucial to successful professional practice. Student development theory provides a contextual framework to guide and direct SAAP professionals' actions and provide insight and understanding of student needs (Killam & Degges-White, 2017).

Student Development Theory and Grieving Students

Education in student development theory is crucial for SAAP professionals' ability to develop and implement interventions to support students in managing a loss. The application of student development theory can help SAAP professionals understand what barriers a student may face and formulate a plan of action. Anderson et al. (2012) recommended examining the variables associated with the loss, which significantly affects a student's coping ability. The same researchers also indicated that understanding the grief transition process is vital to help students find the necessary support while they grieve. Failure to do so will have a detrimental impact and could cause long-term effects such as prolonged grief disorder (Anderson et al., 2012).

Varga et al.'s (2021) study built on the work of Anderson et al. (2012) by seeking insight into the prevalence and effects of loss in young adults' lives as they transition through the grieving process. The study aimed to examine the experiences of 236 grieving emerging adults, the support they utilized, and the impacts of grief (Varga et al., 2021). The cross-sectional survey research design asked questions about students' grief experiences and the correlation to the nature of the loss and types of support utilized. The researchers found that the most frequently used support was family members (87%), followed by friends who had not experienced grief

(59.5%). The counseling center was the most frequently used campus resource, accounting for only 10% of the respondent population; other on-campus supporters were professors (8.3 %) and advisors (3.1%).

Varga et al.'s (2021) research indicated that a student's interpretation of the loss is a crucial factor relating to the ability to cope during the grief process. The relationship to the deceased and the cause of death are critical factors when assessing grief in students (Varga et al., 2021). Schlossberg's Transition Theory was applied in this study to understand the "how" SAAP professionals' impact and support the grieving student coping with loss and the "why" these professionals chose to utilize particular methods. "Transition theory provides a logical foundation for conceptualizing loss as a transition in an emerging adult's life" (Varga et al., 2021, p. 38). Varga et al.'s (2021) study provided a deeper understanding of the strongest grief effects students are experiencing and the connection between the loss and the support utilized. As a result, the current study aimed to examine the reflections of SAAP professionals' experiences in assessing the students' ability to manage a grief loss.

In the next section of this chapter, Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the 4 S system (Schlossberg, 1981) are used to present the theoretical framework for understanding the particular support needs of bereaved students for SAAP professionals to comprehend and assist students moving through the loss transition.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout this section, I refer to the preceding literature, which supports my choice of theoretical application. In the final section of the chapter, I bring the literature and theories

together with a figure display. Schlossberg's transition theory and 4 S's System is utilized to corroborate the role and impact of a SAAP professionals while working with a grieving student.

Traditional-aged students dealing with grief loss during their higher education experience face unique challenges and often feel isolated in an atmosphere primarily geared toward academic and social activity (Sevarty-Sieb and Liew, 2019). Additional challenges include distance from their family and other support systems, lack of peer support, and access to unhealthy coping mechanisms in the college environment (Varga et al., 2021). Individuals who report experiencing a grief loss are at risk of various adverse effects such as lower GPA, feelings of isolation from peers, and adverse physical symptoms, which can lead to an increased risk of withdrawal from college (Servaty-Seib & Liew, 2019). The support systems available to a student while navigating a grief loss is critical to the ability to thrive, and if they do not receive support or assistance from their university, the potential for attrition dramatically increases (Balk, 2001). To answer the first research question focusing on the experiences of master's level SAAP professionals in supporting students who are navigating a grief loss, one must understand the significant transitions students face in higher education. Student affairs professionals can apply Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory to both the typical transitions a student will navigate and will also be applied to those students who are navigating a grief loss.

Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Nancy Schlossberg (2011) stated that every person experiences life transitions that alter their standard course. First, one must understand the meaning of transition in relation to the model and the three different types of transitions. Schlossberg defines a transition as any event or non-event that results in a change of relationship, routine, or role in an individual's life (Goodman et al., 2006). There are three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and

nonevent (Anderson et al., 2012). Anticipated transitions are expected significant life events such as graduating, marrying, and starting a career. Unanticipated transitions are events that disrupt one's life as they are unexpected; examples include serious illness, accidents, or the death of a loved one due to an illness like COVID-19 that is outside of one's control. Lastly, a nonevent transition is defined as events that do not occur. Typical examples are choosing not to marry or not reaching career goals.

Anderson et al. (2012) indicated that it is not the actual transition that is vital but the depth of change in a person's role in life. Anderson et al. (2012) also stated that transitions are processes that take time. The traditional aged population in higher education is in a main phase of emerging adulthood, and navigating a loss event can ignite unique challenges. Additionally, young adults are in a period of many expected transitions, and bereaved college students' focus is diverted away from reaching essential developmental milestones within this stage to deal with the feelings of grief (Varga et al., 2021). It is essential to understand the challenges students face in navigating a loss and the potentially devastating impact on their ability to mature and develop.

According to Schlossberg (Barclay, 2017), the first transition stage results from an anticipated or unanticipated event that results in the need for an individual to change their life circumstances or routine. Typically, the first transition stage is either *moving in* or *moving out* of a circumstance. To understand the phases, *moving in* can be defined as taking on a new role or responsibility, and *moving out* can be defined as the disengagement of a previous role (Schlossberg & Goodman, 2005). For this study, navigating a grief loss can be associated with "moving out" as it represents a separation or end of a relationship that ignites a grief process that requires *moving in* a new routine or role in a person's life. While the transition is related to one identifiable event/nonevent, the process that extends over time is the actual transition (Goodman

et al., 2006). The *moving-in* phase starts with two appraisals of the loss and the reactions, which will entail the student examining the situation as (a) either positive, negative, or irrelevant and (b) what resources are available (Varga et al., 2021). The quality of the support mechanisms directly correlates to the sense of well-being (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg (2011) stated that students and SAAP professionals who look at the positive and negative attributes of the transition could help determine the course of action for navigating change.

It is important to note that perception plays a crucial role in transitions. Varga et al.'s (2021) research indicated that students' interpretation of the loss is a crucial factor relating to the ability to cope during the grief process. To help define a transition for a particular individual, one must first consider the transition type, context, and impact (Evans et al., 2010). Understanding the type of loss is critical as it provides a broad starting point for the transition stages ahead. Context refers to the individual's relationship with the transition and the setting in which the transition occurs, and the impact is determined by how a transition alters one's daily life (Evans et al. 2010). Schlossberg's research indicated that the impact or consequences of an event could vary drastically among humans (Cox et al., 2016). Cox et al. (2016) suggested that the level of impact is determined by several factors, including the event itself, the level of support available after the loss event, and the strategies used to cope with the new reality. When all these factors have been identified, and the new realization of daily life has been accepted, the student can move on to the *moving through* phase.

In the *moving through* phase, the bereaved will start integrating the demands of their new reality with the usual circumstances of their life. The student's perception of their current situation will affect their coping ability and the resources they should utilize. The coping mechanisms can differ according to the individual's view of the event and the available resources

(Goodman et al., 2006). Individuals moving into a transition aim to understand the event's impact on their role and expectations. Once the individual accepts the new parameters of the situation, they must learn how to integrate balance with their existing life to move through the transition. An individual's ability to cope or *moving through* the transition depends upon a unique mixture of resources which Schlossberg referred to as the 4 S's. Student affairs professionals' ability to understand Schlossberg's transition theory and 4 S system will guide students through the process. The 4 S system can help student affairs professionals individualize their support for students as each student will differ in how they will cope with a loss (Schlossberg, 2011).

Nancy Schlossberg's 4 S System

The 4 S's can be defined as the assessment of coping resources and are represented in the following categories: *situation, self, support, and strategies* (Schlossberg, 2011). The *situation* is the event/nonevent that occurred that triggered the moving in transition. Additional factors such as the timing, duration, level of control, and change in role and responsibilities also contribute significantly to this part of the transition. The *self* can be explained in two categories. First is the demographic and personal characteristics that affect how an individual views their life. Examples are age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Second, are the psychological resources which include ego development and values. The third category of *support* encompasses the factors that help the individual to adapt to the transition, such as family, peers, communities, and intimate relationships. Identifying the symptoms and behaviors during the process will help the SAAP professional develop recommendations for support (Varga et al., 2021). The fourth category, *strategies*, involves the coping responses which are divided into

three categories: coping situations that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the situation, and those that aid in stress management in the aftermath of the situation.

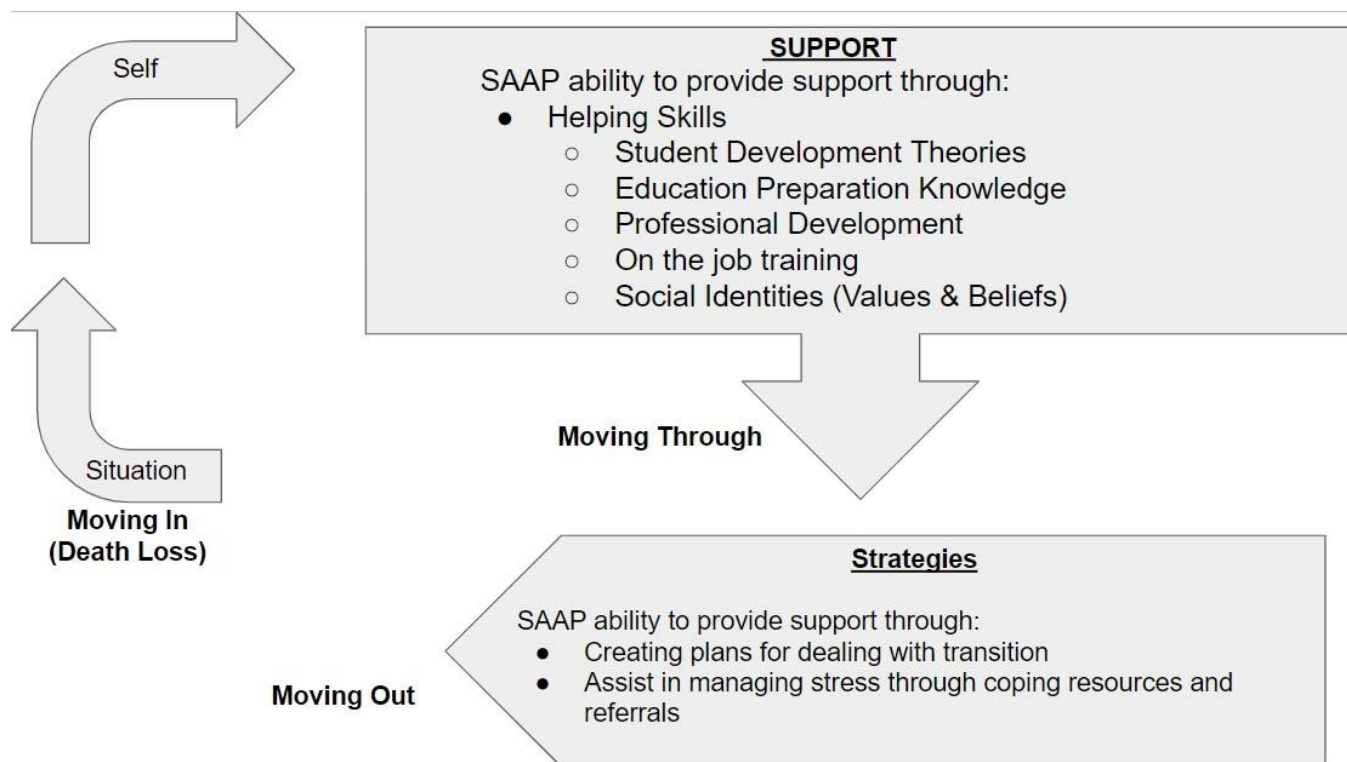
SAAP professionals who have the opportunity to assist a student navigating a grief loss could benefit by using the framework of the Transition Theory and the 4 S System. Schlossberg (2011) stated that transitions take time, each situation involves different experiences, and each student will have different abilities to cope. Schlossberg identified four components influencing a person's ability to cope with the transition. Resources and perception are the keys to transition. SAAP professionals' daily work often requires engaging in dialogue similar to a therapeutic setting; therefore, exploring topics with the bereaved student to help identify potential support resources and strategies for coping with transitions is essential (Stark & Mills, 2020).

Transition Theory and 4 S System in Relation to SAAP Professionals' Work

The support systems available to students navigating a grief loss are critical to thriving on campus. Varga et al. (2021) stated that helping students understand the individuality of their situation can be a vital form of support. The Transition Theory and 4 S System will help SAAP professionals to personalize their support for students as they all differ in how they cope with a loss (Schlossberg, 2011). SAAP professionals, regardless of where they fall under the umbrella of student affairs, can help the student reflect on the details of the loss event and connection to the person who has passed, their current perception of self, coping strategies and available support network, and goal setting to incorporate the new reality into daily life.

As depicted in Figure 2, to effectively support a student navigating a loss, student affairs professionals must have a solid educational foundation rich in student development concepts, such as the Transition Theory. For this study, Schlossberg's theory can be applied to the support efforts of the student affairs professional when working with a student navigating a loss. This

experience begins with the initial “moving in” category in which the type of loss needs to be explored and identified. Once that has been accomplished, the student affairs professional can help the student progress to the “moving through” stage by utilizing the 4 S System. This systematic framework helps the professional develop an autonomous plan with the student that identifies resources to support the change in their daily routine after the loss (Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg (2011) noted that developing a concrete plan with resources to navigate a time that can feel like a mystery could provide a sense of regaining control. Finally, she stated that grieving students could move to the last stage of “moving out” by analyzing the outcomes of the 4 S System and integrating them into their new daily life. Stark and Mills (2020) have examined the change in the curriculum from counseling to administration and question the importance of counseling skills for particular functional areas. By examining the larger picture of this process in several different cases, researchers and educators can determine the critical pieces needed to enhance student affairs professional education programs and the application of support methods. Figure 2 represents the purpose of the study to gain insight into helping skills and the contributions of educational preparation knowledge, professional development opportunities, and social identities are utilized during the support stage when working with students managing a loss.

Figure 2*4 S Schlossberg' Transition Theory and 4 S System*

Schlossberg's transition theory and the support step in the 4 S system can be seen as integral to SAAP professionals' ability to successfully do their job. Utilizing a combination of the facets in the support process will allow the SAAP professional to obtain their goals and responsibilities.

Summary

This chapter considered the literature concerning the increase in grieving students on college campuses due to COVID-19, and the role of SAAP professionals in meeting those needs through the application of helping skills and student development theory application. The history of the inclusion of counseling and helping skills in SAAP program curricula was discussed. This study aimed to reveal perceptions of SAAP professionals and their role in supporting students in managing grief by examining their lived experiences. The analysis allowed a greater understanding of the essential support skills and academic knowledge needed to help students

succeed. Chapter three provides details of the methodology utilized for this study. During the qualitative data collection phase, this study examined the experiences of SAAP professionals supporting a student navigating a loss with a particular focus on the educational knowledge and skills utilized in practice.

Chapter 3

This chapter begins with an overview of the goal of this study and the methodology used to examine the educational and professional experiences of SAAP professionals while supporting grieving students. Through an intrinsic case study design, I sought to understand how SAAP professionals' chosen master's preparation programs and professional development experiences prepared them to work with grieving students and their reflections on the most helpful skills and knowledge they applied in this process. This chapter details the study's bounded case parameters, participants, setting, my positionality, data collection schedule, instrumentation, coding and analysis process, credibility, and limitations.

Intrinsic Case Study

Stake (1995) defined case study research as an investigation and analysis intended to understand the intricacy of the object of study. This research provides a greater understanding of SAAP professionals' perceptions of their experiences supporting a student managing a loss. I had the opportunity to explore the complexity of the interrelations of these transactional experiences. The intrinsic case study allows for a better understanding and description of a particular subject or case. According to Stake (1995), a researcher should view a case as a bounded system and examine it as an object rather than a process. The bounded system for this study was a Mid-Atlantic University, specifically, student services offices.

There are two primary research questions:

1. What are the experiences of student affairs administration prepared (SAAP) professionals at a Mid-Atlantic university supporting students who are navigating a grief loss?
2. How do the same student affairs-prepared professionals apply skills and knowledge gained in their graduate programs to assist students navigating a grief loss?

I developed these research questions due to a desire to understand the individualized experiences of SAAP professionals who have supported grieving students and these professionals' perceptions of applying knowledge and skills in practice. As stated in Chapter Two, Varga et al. (2021) suggested that future research should include in-depth qualitative studies to provide data on the transition of loss and the long-term effects of grief to understand the relationship between grief, support, and student success. Through semi-structured interviews, I examined three SAAP professionals' experiences supporting grieving students. The interviews also included questions about their perceptions of knowledge and skills they found helpful from their SAAP master's preparation programs and professional development opportunities. I also examined program requirements of each student affairs master's preparation program for content relevant to supporting bereaved students.

This study is positioned in a social constructivist paradigm proposed by Stake (1995) and Merriam (2009) to understand the context of the SAAP professionals' experiences supporting bereaved students. Prior studies on bereavement in college students have focused on established institutional policies and procedures, academic supports, and counseling centers (Balk, 2001; Hillis et al, 2021; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008; Varga et al., 2021). However, there is little research on SAAP professionals' preparation and ability to support grieving students. This study used a qualitative approach to understand the individuality of SAAP professionals' experiences and their insight into the knowledge and skills needed during these student interactions. The following section provides a more detailed description of the research methods.

Description of Methods

This section describes the procedural timeline for data collection and analysis. This procedure had five steps: participant recruitment, interviews and document collection, coding

and data analysis, and triangulation. All this information mentioned above was stored in the university one drive program within a password protected computer inside a locked office. This data was shared with my faculty advisor per IRB instructions and parameters.

Procedural Timeline

Table 1 presents the schedule followed for data collection after obtaining IRB approval (See Appendix A). In December 2022, the researcher sent a letter to the directors via email (See Appendix B) with an attached recruitment letter (See Appendix C). The potential participants scheduled appointments with me for a prescreening phone call conversation, which occurred from late December 2022 to January 2023. After confirming participants met the inclusion criteria, we scheduled the interview, and I sent them a Qualtrics link (See Appendix D) to complete the informed consent. Each participant completed their interview in January 2023. Transcription and reflective memoing occurred immediately following each interview, and participants received their transcripts via email for member-checking the accuracy. Additionally, in January and February of 2023 I collected graduate program information from institution websites such as program overview, credit hours, field experience hours, course descriptions and sequences, and content. I also obtained course syllabi from individuals that are related to the programs and completed reflective memoing.

Interview coding and analysis began in February 2023. This included coding of the interview data, an examination of the gathered materials of each represented training program and coding the selected syllabi. In March of 2023, I completed a cross comparative analysis of

program data and focused on writing the final report. Final report submission occurred in April of 2023.

Table 1

Researcher Timeline

Research Phase	Timeline	Description
Participant Recruitment	December 2022 to January 2023	Distribution of email to directors Selection of 3 participants
Interviews, Data Collection, Transcription, and Member Checking	January 2023 to February 2023	Semi-structured interviews of SAAP professionals who met the criteria
Analysis and Coding, examine training program curriculum, and Triangulation	February 2023	Analysis of interview transcripts, examination of SAAP education preparation programs
Data analysis and write final report	March/April 2023	Comparison of data & themes, Writing reports
Edit final report	May 2023	Defense and final edits

Participant Recruitment

I established three specific participant inclusion criteria, which were: (a) a master's degree from a student affairs preparation program, (b) currently employed full-time at the public four-year institution where the study is performed, (c) have supported at least one student who was/is navigating a grief loss experience. Participant selection occurred through email invitations to directors of student services offices (see Table 2 for list of offices). The request for assistance email contained the recruitment letter (Appendix C) detailing the study's purpose, the inclusion criteria, the location, and instructions to contact the researcher for a screening phone call. Each

respondent participated in a screening phone call where I confirmed the participant met the inclusion criteria by asking the following questions to assist in the participant selection process:

1. Have you assisted a student in managing a death loss?
2. In which student affairs functional area are you employed? And what percentage of time do you spend with students?
3. What is the name of your SAAP master's program?
4. What was the master's program's emphasis?
5. From which institution did you receive your master's degree?
6. What was the year of your graduation from this institution?

When it was confirmed that all criteria were met, participants were invited to schedule an interview. I chose this method due to the fluctuation of staff since returning to campus post-pandemic.

Initially, the call for participants produced four responses to opt into the study. Three of the four volunteers did not meet the educational requirement for inclusion in this study. That is, 75% of the staff that responded to the recruitment email had entered the field of student affairs with education backgrounds other than student affairs, providing evidence that there is no definitive pathway to obtain a position with student services offices in higher education (McGill et al, 2021). After sending an initial request to the directors of student services offices, the study recruitment email was distributed to all staff with a call for participants which included a snowball sampling request to forward the information to any staff member who fit the criteria. The second-round email produced two more participants who met inclusion criteria. When the participants answered all the questions and met the criteria for inclusion, they scheduled a zoom interview and received the Qualtrics link which contained the Informed Consent document

(Appendix D). Table 2 exhibits the student services offices which were included in the distribution email:

Table 2

Student Services Offices email Distribution List and office Descriptions

Athletics	prepares student-athletes for success by providing opportunities for them to excel in the classroom, competition, and in the community.
Campus Recreation	engages the community through co-curricular experiences by providing diverse programs to inspire lifelong health and wellness.
Center for Civic Engagement & Social Impact	engages the community through co-curricular experiences by providing diverse programs to inspire lifelong health and wellness.
Center for Trans & Queer Advocacy	provides an environment where the intersectional experiences of trans and queer people are supported, celebrated, validated, and affirmed
Center for Women & Gender Equity	advocate and promote a campus community that values the safety, equality and intellectual advancement of women and other historically marginalized groups
Multicultural Center	dedicated to the success and development of Students of Color through collaborative co-curricular experiences that promote multicultural awareness, generate a sense of belonging, affirm racial and cultural identity
Autism Program	build an inclusive and accepting campus community to better support the experience and success of our degree-seeking students with ASD through indirect and direct supports
Fraternity & Sorority Life	learn how the exchange of knowledge, talents, and perspectives builds character within them and contributes to a better world
Global Engagement Office	dedicated to developing students to become globally aware and engaged members of society
Learning Assistance Resource Center	provide academic support through tutoring and academic success coaching services.
New Student Orientation	dedicated to supporting all types of new students' transition to their higher education experience
Off-Campus & Commuter Services	advocate for equitable access to curricular and co-curricular experiences and institutional resources, regardless of a student's place of residence
Disabilities Students	provide equal access to all campus programs and services that ensure compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 & the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.
Residence Life	assist on-campus residential students in all aspects of their on-campus living experience
Student Conduct	dedicated to maintaining an educational environment by upholding community standards and fostering personal development by assisting individuals in evaluating decisions to promote learning and social responsibility

Student Leadership & Involvement	provide students with learning opportunities through involvement in student organizations, intentional programming, and interpersonal interactions
Student Union & Student Activities	provide services and programs that create campus culture through community building.
Career Development Center	assist students in exploring majors and careers and help them develop resume writing skills, interviewing skills, and job placement strategies
Wellness Promotion	provide opportunities to cultivate sustainable health & well-being skills

Participants

This study used a purposeful sample of SAAP professionals employed full-time at a Mid-Atlantic university who had graduated from master's programs in student affairs. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined this purposeful type of sampling as having defining characteristics within a specific site. This study's participants who fit the inclusion criteria included three full-time SAAP professionals at one large Mid-Atlantic university who had obtained degrees from three different student affairs programs. Table 3 illustrates each participant's associated pseudonym for the remainder of the study, as well as the title of their respective student affairs programs and focuses.

Table 3

Participant Pseudonym, Program Title, and Program Focus.

Pseudonym	Program Title	Program Focus
P#1	Higher Education Policy and Student Affairs	Administration and Policy
P#2	Student Affairs in Higher Education	Administration and Theory
P#3	Higher Education Counseling and Student Affairs	Counseling, Student Development Theory and Administration

The first participant, who was assigned P#1 for this study, graduated from a Higher Education Policy and Student Affairs master's program aligned with ACPA and NASPA standards, that had an administration and policy focus. P#1 gained experience from her graduate assistantships in residence life and housing. At the time of the study, P#1 had been employed for approximately one year at the Mid-Atlantic university. This participant had experience supporting students navigating a loss during a graduate field experience and as a SAAP professional. The next participant, assigned the pseudonym P#2, was a graduate of a Student Affairs in Higher Education master's program with an administration and theory focus, where the curriculum aligned with professional competency guidelines established by ACPA and NASPA. She had worked at the case study institution for 18 months at the time. She had prior SAAP experience in residence life from one professional role and one graduate field experience at two different institutions. This participant has had five years of experience supporting grieving students. The last participant, designated P#3, graduated from a Higher Education Counseling and Student Affairs program. This program was CACREP-accredited with a counseling, theory, and administration combined focus. He had eight years of student affairs experience and had

held four different roles at the Mid-Atlantic university at the time of the study. He had the opportunity to support grieving students in his roles as a graduate student, and professional in three separate offices on campus.

Description of Setting

This study took place at a large-sized, Mid-Atlantic, public regional institution of higher education that is part of a multiple university-state system. The university enrolls approximately 17,719 full-time students, 3,686 of which are enrolled part-time. The enrolled campus population is 73.7% White, 11.6% Black or African American, 5.66% Hispanic or Latino, 3.46% Multiracial, 2.77% Asian, and < 1% Indigenous, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander (Data USA, 2019). The university offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree programs.

Description of Materials

This study gathered qualitative data that allowed the SAAP professionals to highlight their experiences supporting students grieving a loss and to reflect on the skills needed and applied during the process. For this study, I used semi-structured interviews and reflective analytic memo reviews to highlight the participants' thoughts and beliefs during their student interaction. I also collected resources from each student affairs program represented in the participant pool to triangulate the data. The following sections discuss the semi-structured interviews and reflective analytic memoing used in this study.

Semi-Structured Interviews

With this research, I aimed to explore and understand the preparation of SAAP professionals concerning day-to-day experiences in a support role. This study used a semi-structured interview method conducted via the Zoom platform containing six pre-determined

open questions to prompt a rich discussion (See Appendix E). The goal of the interview questions was to bring forth the intricacies of the individual professional experiences of SAAP professionals. Rustin et al. (2022) indicates that the semi-structured interview technique has greater potential to gain in-depth evidence using adaptability and flexibility with the participants while allowing the focus of the study to remain the same. The qualitative nature of the semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed for follow-up, clarification, and the opportunity to examine specific examples. The uniqueness of this bounded case has had minimal research to date and deserves examination for the intricacies within each support experience.

Stark and Mills (2020) identified that newer student affairs training programs lack emphasis on counseling techniques and focus more on administrative functions. I designed two questions where the participants were invited to share the helping skills, they found important when supporting grieving students and how their master's program and professional development opportunities helped them prepare for the support role. While student affairs graduate preparation programs have offered a variety of courses, concerns have circulated around curricula that do not include training in helping skills. I included two additional questions related to research by Servaty-Seib and Taub (2008) that focused on how social identities affect the grief process of bereaved individuals. Each participant engaged in a 60-minute interview via Zoom. I reviewed informed consent at the beginning of each interview to refresh the participant on those procedures and their ability to exit the process at any moment. The Zoom platform allowed me to capture the data in audio and video formats. Once the interview concluded, I completed the verbatim transcription process as a narrative data source. After this, each participant received a copy of their transcript and a prompt to provide feedback and clarification on the transcript for

the member check process. There was a designated one-week period to complete the member check process. All participants completed the process in the allotted time frame.

Data Coding and Analysis

A credible study begins with a well-structured and research-guided study design. The credibility of this qualitative research relied on a clear audit trail of all study processes, procedures, documents, and data collection. This study utilized multiple data sources, coding and member checking of the interview data, systematic data analysis, and analytic memoing with reflexivity throughout the entire data collection and analysis process.

The next section details the step-by-step data coding and analysis process and credibility efforts. Two separate processes were conducted based on the interview completion. Once each participant completed the interview, I immediately collected the information needed from their respective education programs. The interview and program data were synthesized in a systematic method of coding cycles and analytic methods. Then the data were triangulated.

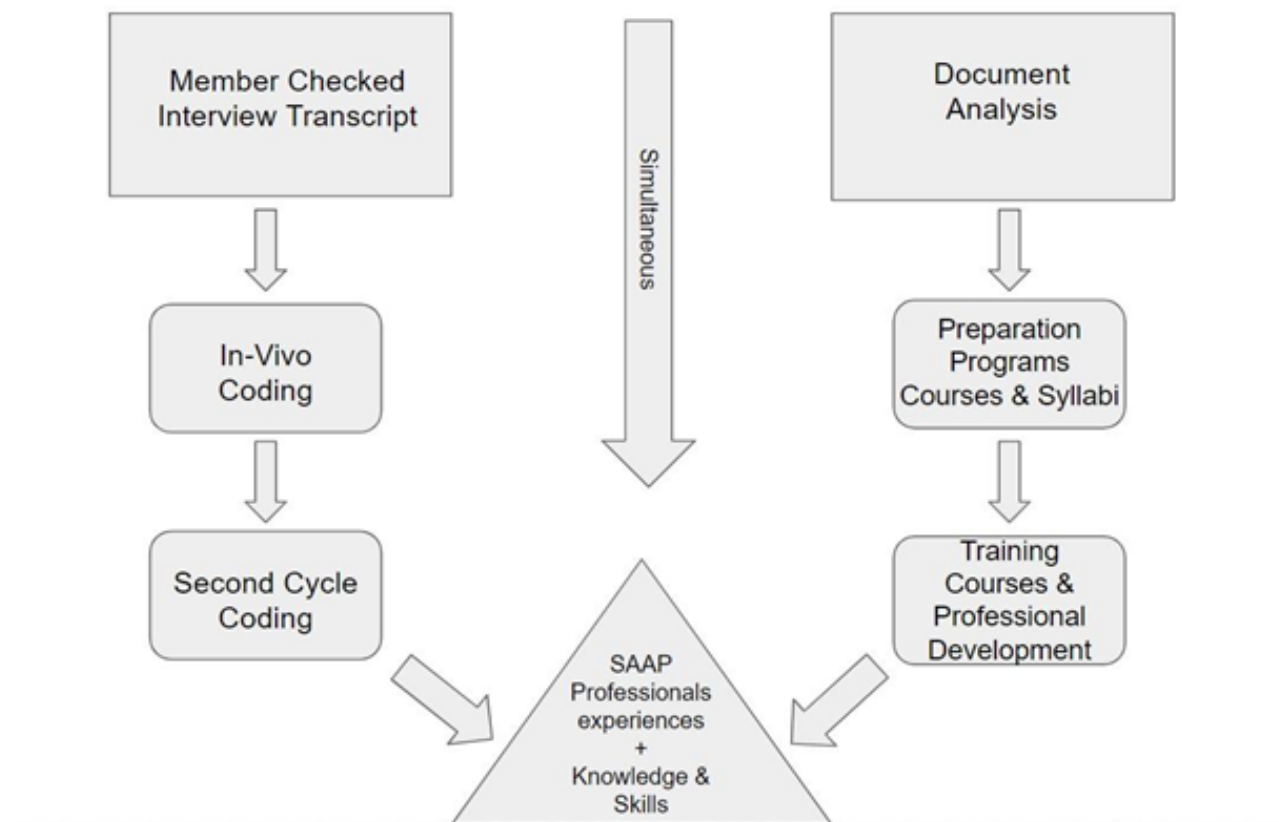
Transcription and Coding of Interview Data

As described above, the transcription process occurred directly after each interview concluded. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) define transcription as the process of converting audio files and field notes into text data. The Zoom function assisted in transcribing each of the interviews, which I then reviewed three times for accuracy by listening to the interview recordings. I edited errors in punctuation, corrected content errors on the autogenerated transcripts and deleted filler words such as “so,” “like,” “um,” and “ok.”

During the first cycle of coding, I utilized an inductive method to analyze the transcripts. This analysis allowed me to produce In Vivo codes based on participant responses. Thomas (2006) stated that the inductive approach is a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data

in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific objectives. As seen in Figure 3, this cycle allowed me to start seeing the categories and themes that emerged from the SAAP professionals' responses.

Throughout the coding process, I examined and refined responses that were applicable to more than one category to capture the true experience of the participant. I focused on words such as skills, development, identity, values, training, and support. After completing the second cycle of focused coding two themes emerged with three categories to answer the two research questions.

Figure 3*Coding and Analysis of Data Procedures**Document Analysis*

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research where pertinent documents are analyzed and interpreted to provide significance to the dissertation topic. For this study, I collected information on each participant's education program. I gathered program overviews, course requirements and sequences, credit hours, and field experience hours from institution websites. I also requested course syllabi from individuals related to each program to triangulate the interview data.

Each participant's graduate program was analyzed by cataloging the data relating to program focus, credit hours, field experiences, and course plans into one Excel sheet. During a

cross-comparative analysis, it became clear that each program represented in this study had differing requirements for credit and field experience hour requirements. P#1's policy and administration program required 39 credits and 400 field experience hours. P#2's student development theory and administration program required 42 credits and 450 field experience hours. Finally, P#3's counseling, student development theory, and administration program required 48 credits and 700 field experience hours. Each of the field experiences varied in their expected hours and learning objectives. A thorough examination of the course plans allowed me to see that the participants who graduated from programs which required more credit hours completed at least one academic course dedicated to helping skills. All three participants completed courses dedicated to student development theory. Additionally, each program also required courses in cultural competence, history of student affairs, and administrative management, and offered elective courses.

I was particularly interested in examining syllabi from courses that involved the learning and application of helping skills and student development theory. After assessing each course plan, I chose syllabi from courses that indicated these topics in their learning objectives and goals. The amount of courses presented, and the sequence in which they were offered, varied within each master's program. Four codes were selected from the interview analysis and used to deductively code the selected syllabi: helping skills, reflective practitioner, student development theory, and cultural competence. I analyzed course descriptions, learning goals and objectives, course content, and assignments within each syllabus to create categories. Course assignments emerged as a critical piece of data upon completion of the cross-comparative analysis.

Professional Development and Training Opportunities

Each participant reported that they did not utilize any professional development resources as these are not required in their roles. Therefore, I did not examine professional development opportunities at the Mid-Atlantic institution.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

A top priority in this research was credibility and trustworthiness due to the several connections with my positionality. Credibility relates to the validity of the interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument and therefore all data are interpreted through their lens. Trustworthiness in a study is the reliability of the data and sources. As the researcher, I ensured the quality of this study by developing a well-organized interview process, member checking transcripts, as well as thorough data coding and analysis procedures, and a robust systematic collection of analytic reflective memoing. The committee members provided feedback on interview questions and the advisor facilitated a mock interview session with an assessment of the researcher's verbal communication.

The researcher and committee members examined the data coding and analysis procedures several times to ensure the categories and themes that emerged truly reflected the transcriptions and programs represented. The committee chair discussed reflective memos with the researcher at weekly meetings to address any researcher biases that emerged as the process progressed. Additionally, the advisor for this study took on the role of a peer debriefer during the coding and data analysis process to ensure dependability. She became familiar with this study's methodology, findings, and conclusions to evaluate the decisions made during the data collection and analysis process. Throughout the dissertation process, we discussed raw data, preliminary

themes and categories, data analysis and reduction notes, and analytic memo entries. The feedback and documentation she provided confirmed that my findings were grounded in the data.

Triangulation

The final step of triangulation commenced when the interview codes, document analysis, and reflective memos were compared for themes. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined triangulation as verifying the evidence from different types of individuals, data, and collection methods in descriptions and themes in qualitative data. This process helped provide validity to this study by creating an in-depth picture of the research inquiry. For this study, I used multiple methods to confirm findings which included several cycles of data coding, program analysis, analytic memoing with reflexivity, literature review, and application to theoretical framework. The coding cycles included inductive InVivo coding and two cycles of focused coding. A comparative analysis of program overviews and content, coupled with deductive coding of syllabi (using codes obtained during the interview transcription) comprised the program analysis process. Analytic memoing was conducted at the conclusion of each of the aforementioned processes to capture thoughts, queries, or biases immediately. By the completion of the data analysis process, the literature review supported the application of the theoretical framework and informed implications for future research and practice.

Researcher's Positionality

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) recommend clarification of a researcher's positionality influences from the onset of the study. As the researcher, I recognize I am a former SAAP professional, I graduated from a counseling focused student affairs program, and was a bereaved student. I remained hyper aware of my personal feelings to remain objective in each step of the data collection and analysis processes. Reflective analytic memoing was a tool that allowed me

to recognize the researcher's role in performing research and the connection to the research object. These memos which were completed after each screening phone conversation, interview process, document collection process, coding cycle and cross comparative analysis mitigated the potential adverse effects of biases that may affect the research process.

I graduated from a CACREP-accredited counseling-focused higher education and student affairs program in 2017, and I remained aware of my biases and limited their effect on interview interactions by not imposing my values or beliefs through the phrasing of questions or the interpretation of data. The focus stayed on the SAAP professionals, and I limited sharing my personal insights. While interviewing participants who graduated from programs that did not have a counseling focused curriculum, I remained fully aware of my concern surrounding these programs' limited emphasis on helping skills. I managed my bias by making sure to avoid using judgmental terms or asking leading questions regarding helping skills or their programs' emphases. Additionally, I participated in a mock interview session with my advisor to ensure my verbiage and transitions in between topics was appropriate and free of any bias. The utilization of reflexivity and clarification of my bias allowed me to examine my biases which included my beliefs, judgments, and practices during the research process.

I have also experienced being a bereaved student. This time was a very emotional period of my life, and I recognized that my personal beliefs and those of the staff member who helped me played a pivotal role in my ability to achieve student success. I reflected on any biases or individual opinions through the memoing process as I coded each interview transcript and analyzed the courses from the education programs. I completed entries focused on methodology after each meeting in addition to writing down additional thoughts throughout the dissertation

process. This topic is timely and vital in higher education and needs to be treated with respect to have a long-lasting impact.

Informed Consent and Protection of Human Subjects

Qualitative research methods must anticipate, identify, and create steps to eliminate ethical data collection issues (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Though this study presented minimal risks to the participants, I asked them to disclose in-depth descriptions of personal experiences, including private details of the student/professional relationship. A review of all procedures and safeguards in the interview protocol and obtaining and reviewing informed consent allowed me to assure the participants of confidentiality procedures and strengthened my ability to protect my participants.

Before the interviews started, I reiterated the study procedures and reminded the participants that there was a minimal risk of discomfort associated with discussing grief. To minimize this risk, I informed the participants that they may stop participating without consequences or skip any questions they were uncomfortable answering. Participants also received the contact information for the WCU employee assistance-program (EAP) services, which offers employees additional counseling support, at the beginning of the interview. After the interview, I assigned pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. All forms, audio recordings, and study data were stored on my password-protected computer until destroyed on the set date of three years after the completion of the study.

Limitations

The limitations of this intrinsic case study design include minimal participants at one institution and time constraints. The three participants in this study represented a diverse pool of preparation programs, but further research should consider increasing the number of required

participants to expand the amount of data collected. This study also utilized one in-depth interview per each of the three participants due to time constraints. The time frame of the data collection period was limited to one semester.

Additionally, I acknowledge that conducting this study at one institution may inhibit the diversity of the sampling. One of the inclusion criteria, the requirement of a master's degree in student affairs, created difficulties in obtaining participants. It became clear that SAAP professionals have a variety of educational backgrounds outside of student affairs. Three SAAP professionals tried to opt in but did not meet the education requirements of this study, which may have excluded valuable insight. Also, my experiences and knowledge gained as a SAAP professional employed at the case study institution limited my interpretations. These factors may influence my observations and conclusions related to the research problem.

Finally, as a former SAAP professional at this institution, I recognize that one of my prior duties was collaborating with other SAAP staff members at the institution where this study was conducted. One participant in this study had an established relationship with the researcher. Though the institution did not employ me at the time of the study, the colleagues who had previously worked with me could have felt that they could not disclose truthful information due to concerns of confidentiality in relation to my previous collegial relationships with university staff.

Summary

This chapter outlined the overarching goals of this study and the methodology used to examine the educational and professional experiences of SAAP professionals while supporting grieving students. I interviewed three full-time SAAP professionals employed by the case study institution for sixty minutes each to explore their experiences with the research topic. The

triangulation processes of several cycles of data coding, program analysis, and analytic memoing with reflexivity established the credibility of this study. The next chapter will present participant data and study findings.

Chapter 4

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore student affairs administration prepared (SAAP) professionals' experiences at one Mid-Atlantic university while supporting grieving students, as well as consider the impact of knowledge and skills obtained from student affairs education preparation programs. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the experiences of student affairs administration master's prepared professionals at a Mid-Atlantic university supporting students who are navigating a grief loss?
2. How do the same student affairs-prepared professionals apply skills and knowledge gained in their graduate programs to assist students navigating a grief loss?

This section presents the findings of the two research questions and will include quotes and responses to support this study's research. For this study, the language used by the participants is retained to capture the authenticity of their responses.

Participant Demographics

There were three total participants in this study (P#1, P#2, P#3). The participants in this study have various levels of experience as SAAP professionals and were employed in roles that have different percentages of student contact. Daily student contact percentage ranged from 25% to 90% and can fluctuate given duty-specific tasks.

P#1 had been employed in her first full time SAAP professional position with disability services at the Mid-Atlantic university at the time of the study. She had completed one year at the institution and typically spent 80% of her time interacting with students. She also had two field experiences during her SAAP master's program, which were in the functional areas of residence life and disability services. This participant was enrolled in her graduate program

during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of her graduate program was administration and policy, with the opportunity to gain experience through two internship classes. Her field experience provided a similar percentage of time spent with students as her professional experience.

P#2 had been employed with the Mid-Atlantic university for 18 months in the office of student conduct, where she spent on average 50% to 70% of her time with students each week. She also had two years' worth of experience with residence life at a public four-year institution as well as graduate internship experience in residence life at the institution where she completed her master's degree. This participant was a full-time employee in residence life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this participant's graduate program was theory and administration.

P#3 had a total of eight years of SAAP experience gained at the Mid-Atlantic university through graduate assistantships and professional roles. His first role was as a graduate student in residence life where he would spend 90% of his time working with undergraduate students. Upon graduation, he gained full-time employment at the Mid-Atlantic university with residence life. This role gave him the opportunity to spend about 80% of his time interacting with undergraduate and graduate students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, P#3 transitioned into a role in virtual care support services, where he spent an average of 25% of his time interacting with students. Once the campus reopened, he was able to secure a role in student conduct, where he increased his time working with undergraduate and graduate students to 70% weekly. In this role he also supervised graduate students. This participant's graduate program had a focus on counseling, student development theory and administration.

Table 4 presents a comparison of each education preparation program represented by the

participants. The examination and analysis of each preparation program's curriculum, structure and course sequence provide essential data to better understand participant responses about the application of knowledge and skills. As noted below, each program required a different amount of credit hours as well as field experience (FE) hours. While each program contained similarities in course curriculum, the academic course objectives provided each student with different opportunities for experiential learning and practice. A significant point of data that emerged from program analysis was the academic course sequence and structure of field experience opportunities. In table 4, the reader can see one program represented had integrated the helping skills curriculum into a field experience course while the other two programs had academic courses dedicated to learning those skills.

Table 4*Comparison of Education Preparation Programs*

	P1	P2	P3
Program focus	Administration and Policy	Administration and Theory	Counseling, Student Development Theory and Administration
Credit hours	39 credits	42 credits	48 credits
FE hours	400 hours total	450 hours total	700 hours total
Helping skills coursework	Blended into one field experience course	One course	Two courses
Student Development Theory coursework	One Course	Two courses	One Course
Cultural Diversity coursework	One course	One course	One Course

Research Question #1

The first research question asked about the experiences of SAAP professionals while supporting a student navigating a grief loss. I answered this question by exploring each participant's individualized experiences and examining the connection to the second research question of applying skills and knowledge when supporting a grieving student.

Helping Skills Applied in Practice with Grieving Students

Participants in this study reflected on the helping skills utilized as SAAP professionals during interactions with students navigating grief loss. Though none of the participants had received coursework or professional development training specific to grief and loss, the importance of building rapport and conveying cultural competence emerged in each interview.

Ivey et al.'s (2010) Microskills Hierarchy demonstrates the foundational level of helping skills as cultural competence in basic attending skills. Within the hierarchy pyramid, as seen in figure one, located in chapter two, essential skills such as active listening, reflection, and empathy are listed as effective tools of communication and rapport building in helping relationships.

Rapport Building. According to Ivey et al. (2010), rapport building is essential to establishing a helper and helpee relationship. SAAP professionals can achieve rapport within a student relationship by utilizing common helping skills such as active listening, empathy, reflection, and the use of silence. These helping skills are essential at the initial points of contact and were evident in the scope of the participants' practice. All three participants noted that they intentionally built a safe space for students to build trust and feel at ease. This section begins by presenting how these SAAP professionals build rapport with students through creating a safe space, empathy, active listening and reflection, and the use of silence to assist grieving students at one Mid-Atlantic University. The summary will include observations of the similarities and differences among the professionals' use of these skills in the context of their educational preparation.

Creating a Safe Space. The participants in this study had various experiences as SAAP professionals and were employed in roles with different percentages of student contact. At the time of this study, the participants' average student contact percentage ranged from 25% to 90% and could fluctuate given duty-specific tasks. Though their roles and student exposure were different, a common thread can be seen with all three participants through the specific ways they created safe spaces for students navigating a loss.

P#1 shared two different experiences supporting grieving students. Her first experience was in a graduate assistantship with residence life with a student who had lost a sibling. This

experience happened soon after P#1 had suffered her own loss of a sibling and she noted that “it was weird trying to navigate how to help someone when I was still trying to figure it out myself.” P#1 took certain aspects of that experience and applied what she had learned in her next graduate assistant role in the disability services office at the Mid-Atlantic University. The second grieving student P#1 assisted had lost a grandparent and was trying to figure out how to balance their academics while grieving. She shared how she was able to genuinely communicate with this student while providing resources and support simultaneously. She reflected on her ability to get the student what “they needed with me by their side” and emphasized how she established that connection.

She described how she intentionally created a calm aesthetic and atmosphere in her office by displaying positive quotes, hanging up animal pictures, and adding lighting to elicit feelings of tranquility and reduce the harshness of the standard space. She shared, "I've noticed when they [students] enter my office, that angst that follows them washes away slowly, and they're able to kind of talk about it [loss] a little bit more." She acknowledged that her ability to create this type of atmosphere resulted from her own loss experience and has contributed to the values she kept close as a SAAP professional. She stated, “I try and create that atmosphere because I know when I go through something very harsh, or when it comes to the time of the month my sibling has passed away, I get in that very sad mode.” Her admission is both genuine and empathetic. As she shared details of her own grief, it became clear that this experience influenced her application of helping skills when working with those students. This participant assisted students through the application of skills which align with support in the 4 S system.

P#2 spoke of her experience as a residence hall coordinator at a different university, during which she worked with a student who lost her mother. She met with the grieving student

multiple times in her office where “she would cry often in my office talking about the situation.” P#2 established a routine pattern of meetings with this student in her office to offer a safe space where this student could discuss her relationship with her father after the loss, peer relationships, and academic struggles. P#2 quickly realized a pattern where their meetings were lengthy and would accommodate her schedule to support the student. She shared that she “knew that when they came in, you'd be there for an hour, hour and a half, just talking about how they were doing.” P#2 ultimately became the person who laid the foundation to help the student transition through the grieving process which eventually led to a referral to the CARE team and the counseling center. During their meetings, P#2 was not only able to use helping skills that fall under the category of support in the 4 S system but also created a plan within a safe space to develop effective strategies for student success.

P#3 referred to an experience in his student conduct role with a student whose partner lost a parent. He spoke of how he was able to talk to this person and ask them to sit in his space to calm down. He stated, “they came into my office in a complete like frantic panic of ‘I need to go! My significant other’s [parent] passed. I do not know what to do.’” P#3 recounted the conversation’s progression and the steps he took to deescalate the situation by providing a calm atmosphere and addressing the student’s anxiety. He told her “Listen, I understand, we will take care of this, but this [job tasks] is not the priority at this moment. You are taking care of what you need to take care of and getting the support you need is what will be essential here.” In those moments P#3 supported her by cultivating a space to share her anxiety connected with this grief loss. In this instance, he was able to integrate support and strategies from the 4 S system.

All three participants utilized the practice of supporting students with intentional action to provide a safe place for students to grieve. Additionally, all three of them utilized their empathy,

an essential helping skill, to support each student in an individualized manner. The next subtheme within rapport building is the application of empathy skills which helps build rapport because it allows SAAP professionals to see a situation through a student's lens.

Empathy. All three participants reported the use of empathy, which is an essential part of the communication process while working with students navigating a loss. Additionally, each participant had coursework and assignments that focused on the development and application of empathy. Ivey et al., (2010) referred to Carl Rogers' description of empathy as entering the world of the client and communicating that there is an understanding of the client's experience of the world. To put yourself in their shoes, you must see the world through their eyes and ears, and this is done through the basic listening sequence (Ivey et al. 2010). Empathy can be one of the most effective methods to build rapport with a student as the SAAP professional understands their individual situation with honesty and integrity.

P#1 noted the importance of this essential helping skill during a student interaction by saying "the helping skills that I thought was important is being open and telling them about my experiences, my ups and downs, and trying to help them know that it is okay to share how they are feeling." This participant had referenced her own loss experiences several times in the interview and noted that she learned to use a particular language from her mother. She said "My mom is a teacher. I think I've definitely picked up on her use [of] the language of 'I feel this way,' or 'this is what's going on,' and 'what can I do for you?'" P#1 used sayings such as "talk to them as their family," "help them figure out ways to heal... With me by their side," and "sharing

in their loss.” All these notions show the level of empathy and personal connection that this professional put into her work, offering support to a student who was dealing with loss.

P#2 showed her use of empathy by giving the student a chance to share about behaviors that resulted from grief. She shared that “if I have a conduct meeting with the student, we are there to talk about the policies and their behavior. When you're giving them a chance to open up about why that behavior occurred, you start learning about hardships, or you start learning about crises they've been through.” She reflected on her ability to see the current situation through the lens of the student. She expressed that “if we value students, prioritizing [their situation] first and then get back to our original goal later” is an important way to show empathy. It is interesting to note that in this example, P#2's role is to provide the student with strategies for behavior, but she recognized that her empathy and helping skills will at times alter the course of action to more of a support interaction.

P#3 focused on the value of the actual human being sitting before him. He depicted his priorities regarding student interaction and clearly indicated that student support will always come first before a task that is part of his role at the Mid-Atlantic University. He said “I tell anyone that I come in contact with, you're a human first, you're a student second, and then this job is third. You're human first. That needs to be a priority.” Although he has held three different roles at this institution with varying levels of student interaction and duties, his empathy was consistent because he always treated the student's experience as a top priority. He shared that “working intentionally with the student to let them know that I was there to support them in that moment” was paramount in that helping relationship.

Although none of these participants articulated the word empathy when speaking about their individualized experiences, it is clear from their responses that this skill was present in their

interactions. They each shared steps they took to listen to the grieving student in order to support them. An essential piece of empathy is actively listening while working with individuals. In the next section, I present participants' application of active listening and reflection skills by discussing their experiences listening to students' stories of loss. Active listening and reflection often go hand in hand to provide clarity and context in helping conversations.

Active Listening and Reflection. All three participants' responses indicated that active listening and reflection are crucial skills when facilitating conversations surrounding a loss. A SAAP professional can accomplish active listening by paying attention to what the student says verbally and nonverbally. SAAP professionals can enhance rapport building by recognizing their own body language as well as the student. In situations of sharing loss, these professionals use reflection to consider content, feelings, and meaning in responses, and convey understanding. Reflection also helps the student gain insight through SAAP professionals' paraphrasing and summarizing the conversation. Through active listening and reflection, the SAAP professional lets the student know their voice has been heard.

P#1 made a point that when she worked with the grieving students she was always "trying to help them know that it is OK to share how they are feeling." She repeated three times during the interview that it is essential to impart the message "that it is okay not to be okay." This participant did not articulate active listening to be one of the skills she used, but the process of active listening came through in some of the verbiage used in her description of her interactions. She shared that by listening to them, she was "allowing them to kind of lead where they wanted to go." She also noted that by reading the situation, she could decide on her next reflection steps. She stated, "if they didn't want to hear about what was going on, and I can read on their faces, like, Okay, I'm starting to lose them, then I stop. And I asked them again... What

can I do for them? I think that's the biggest thing that many people are not always used to hearing because they don't know how to answer it all the time." P#1 displayed active listening as a form of support by changing the pace and direction of the conversation based on a student's responses and nonverbal communication which allowed the student to lead the conversation.

P#2's response to the question, "what helping skills did you find most important when helping a student manage a loss," was: "active listening, reflecting back content, reflecting back feeling, and summarizing." She stated "when you're helping people you must be able to figure out, especially during a grief or a loss, when it's appropriate to state your thoughts about it. Or if you're just kind of there just to reflect back what they're saying." She spoke about "trying to figure out, do they want just the listening ear or do they want me to provide resources and guidance." She reflected on using a mix of helping skills according to the individual situation. Her determination of the situation informed the support and strategies that she implemented throughout the conversation, which reflects the importance she placed on active listening and reflection.

P#3, who has had the most experience as a SAAP professional in various offices, used the term "being present" to describe the importance of active listening in establishing trusting relationships with students:

I think the one thing I've learned in my eight years at [Mid-Atlantic University] is the baggage and the harm that these students are coming to campus with. And some of them never addressing those, or never having that support, is scary. And I really have learned that, though I might have to pass over to the counseling center, being present with that

student, at that moment, for them to be able to get their feelings out for maybe the first time is something that that's super critical.

P#3's statement is a prime example of the impact SAAP professionals can have when encouraging a student to talk freely about their loss and letting the student lead the conversation to where they need support. He acknowledged that the proper use of support would lead to appropriate actions of providing strategies when needed.

Each of these individuals had learned the skills of active listening in their respective programs as a part of their interpersonal skills curriculum. Fortunately, each of these individuals had the opportunity to practice this skill through application and self-evaluation. Additionally, all three participants indicated that in some situations, encouraging students to speak freely may be difficult for both parties due to the nature of the topic. Grief and loss can elicit uncomfortable feelings in both the SAAP professional and the grieving student. "Being comfortable with being uncomfortable" was a skill that P#3 talked about learning from a previous supervisor. He shared, "I think that was the one thing I've really learned about loss and grief, is we want it to be instantaneous, we want to support the student, and we almost want a resolution right away," but sometimes that student may be in denial that they need support. That student may need time to absorb and process, which can be achieved using silence.

Use of Silence. Two of the three participants referenced the advantages of utilizing silence in their student interactions. Ivey et al. (2010) indicated in some instances the best thing a helper can do is support the helpee through silence to allow for the space and time to ponder the situation and think carefully before responding. P#2 and P#3 discussed using this skill, which may reflect the different emphases of their training programs. As noted in Table 4, their respective programs had an entire academic course dedicated to helping skills, whereas P#1 had

a course with helping skills training embedded in a field experience course. The use of this skill was significant enough in the two interviews to warrant recognition as a contributor to this theme.

P#2 said that allowing time for silence lets the students direct the conversation and builds a space for summarizing, reflection, and clarification of what the student was sharing. Her descriptions show two different ways she utilized this skill: (a) to give the student the opportunity to process the interaction between them and (b) time to be still and reflect. She provided examples of her implementation of silence, such as: “Do you mind if we pause? I use pauses to say, 'I want to make sure I'm understanding what's going on.'” She also spoke about the difficulty a helper may have with silence when she reflected, “it's hard when this is not going anywhere in a positive direction because they're just rambling on and on, and they're also physically upset.” Ivey et al. (2010) indicated that when a client is in tears, the best type of support may be simply supporting through presence and silence. P#2 discussed ways she tried to keep the interaction with this grieving student productive while allowing them to share their feelings. This method of support allowed the conversation to be effective and focused.

P#3 sincerely commented about not embracing the skill of silence during the scope of his academic career and the consequences he experienced as a SAAP professional trying to fill the space:

I will own the one challenge that I've learned in grad school is being the one that doesn't embrace the silence. Being the one that when the student doesn't want to talk, I'm just going to start jumping in and filling in what they're not willing to say. Unfortunately, I

got burned. And I learned that's not always helpful. And when you start filling in things for a student, it really takes power away.

This powerful insight is something that P#3 uses in his daily work. He shared, “I feel that when in those moments, it's not me to start interjecting. I need the student to help me understand what's wrong and help me paint the picture of what is going on here. So, then I can properly refer.” This statement reflects the ability to use silence to determine the course of action needed to be taken within each situation. The use of silence can also allow the SAAP professional time to reflect on what the student needs instead of quickly handing it off to another resource.

Summary. P#3 shared an interesting statement: “a student is like an onion, and there are so many different layers that you need to start picking and weeding through to understand how we best support [them].” Each participant provided evidence to support that statement, showing that they had taken the time to examine those layers. All three participants showed similarities in rapport building through their helping skills of creating a safe space for students, empathy, active listening, and reflection. P#2 and P#3 could more accurately define the nuances of these helping skills. Interestingly, P#2 and P#3 shared that the use of silence skill was learned in their respective graduate programs. Both participants had taken helping skill-focused courses in their programs. The one stark difference is that P#1 did not articulate the use of silence. P#1’s graduate program did not include a helping skills course but one field experience course, taken in the spring semester of the first year, with a portion of the time dedicated to basic helping skills. Her program had more courses that focused on the impact of cultural competence, which also emerged as another important piece of supporting a grieving student.

Cultural Competence. Every SAAP professional must practice cultural competence; however, their guidelines will vary based on their preparation program. SAAP professionals

adhere to the guiding principles of the joint ACPA and NASPA competencies (2015), as well as the CACREP (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) social and cultural diversity standards which are one of the eight common core areas of foundational knowledge. Cultural competency involves SAAP professionals recognizing their own social responsibility to integrate identity, social justice, and inclusion skills into their scope of practice. It is important to note that while these participants obtained different master's degrees in student affairs, they each experienced training standards that included cultural competence.

P#1 spoke about connecting identity theory with her work as a SAAP professional. She stated, "It all connects with identity and understanding that we are who we are because of the experiences and the things that we go through." She has taken the cultural competence standard and applied it to her work with the two grieving students by honoring who they were as individuals and "connect[ing] with them on that level." P#1 listened to students' individualized stories of their backgrounds and family structures to support and help them create strategies for navigating their personal and academic lives. She also shared "I feel like [identity] is kind of where different people's beliefs and standards, or where they feel most comfortable at maybe plays a role." P#1's effort to meet the individualized needs of each student to transition through their loss events clearly reflects the ACPA and NASPA competency standards P#1 learned in her education program.

P#2 shared her belief that SAAP professionals should have the ability to communicate appropriately with students who have different spiritual beliefs. She also said that this does not

happen 100% of the time and she wishes that all SAAP professionals would be genuine, and client centered. She stated:

I would hope that if people are genuine student affairs professionals... regardless of what the student is going through, but specifically a grief loss, they would be able to communicate with someone appropriately... If [the student does] have a religious background, and maybe they'll want to say, God is now with your someone, so whoever it is, and then that could throw a student off. So, you know, religious beliefs could be a factor, although, again, I'd hope that student affairs professionals aren't pushing their own beliefs onto the student themselves. And they're trying to figure out where the student themselves falls in their own beliefs and values, and then match that in the conversation.

P#2's profound statement illustrated the personal navigation of SAAP professionals' values and beliefs, as well as their ability to compartmentalize that portion of their personal identity to support a student grieving a loss. The knowledge she gained through her preparation program has given her the skills to meet this standard.

P#3 spoke about the implications of race and gender when a SAAP professional is the first point of contact with grieving students. Reflecting on his role in residence life, he said, "I know for a white straight man pops up to the scene, there's going to be a potential impact... whether it would be positive or negative." He discussed how each situation is different, and depending on the factors, the person who first shows up from the Mid-Atlantic university will determine the course of action. P#3 also recounted how he spent a large amount of time with the students in residence life, which he believed had a positive effect on the students. He said, "when I was an RD, I had a lot more success because I was in the weeds with the students. I was living with the students, and they knew me. So, I think social identity matters, but I also think social

relationship and rapport really matters as well on how they're going to respond.” This participant spoke of considering identity in terms of gender, race, religion, and culture.

He also shared, “I think that being a first line, as I learned in grad school, is not always the easiest... mental health and talking to folks about [grief], depending on culture, depending on the student, is something that is taboo, or they're not willing to do it because it is very uncomfortable.” This statement also lends credibility to the learning and application of cultural competence from research question one and how he has adapted the competencies into his values and practice as a SAAP professional. He has integrated all the cultural competence knowledge he gained from his graduate program into his work and emphasized that his immersive experiences with the students allowed for deeper connections and understanding in their relationship.

Summary

Cultural competence is valued by organizations such as NASPA, ACPA, and CACREP as an essential tool of a SAAP professional. All three participants have reflected on the importance of being knowledgeable in this skill by self-reflection and application when working with students navigating loss. The category of cultural competence was consistently reflected across the coding of each participant as part of their self-reflection on identity and application of skills when supporting grieving students. The next section will examine the participants’ reflections on their experiences with their own graduate program and observations of the education curriculum and helping skills of student supervisees.

Research Question #2

The second research question asked how student affairs-prepared professionals apply skills and knowledge gained in their graduate programs to assist students navigating a grief loss. I asked each of the participants how their master’s program and professional development

opportunities prepared them to work with grieving students. This study revealed that all participants gained valuable skills from their respective education preparation programs through their reflections on their ability to connect with grieving students and their skills essential to provide a positive impact. Interview data from this question also revealed gaps in both the participants' education preparation and professional development opportunities, as well as some of their suggestions for future SAAP professionals.

I share my findings in two sections below, starting with the knowledge and skills gained from education preparation programs. The next section reflects on gaps in education preparation as well as opportunities for professional development in grief work. Finally, research question #2 will end with a summary and suggestions these participants shared from their experiences on the front line.

All three participants in this study graduated from education programs that prepare graduate students to work as SAAP professionals in higher education. Each program aligned its program and course learning goals and objectives with the professional competencies outlined by their professional organizations and/or accrediting bodies. It is important to consider these standards as they are the foundations for SAAP professionals' education preparation programs.

Table 5 represents each participant's program, its focus, and its guiding standards and competencies.

Table 5

Guiding Standards and Competencies of Education Preparation Programs

Participant	Program Focus	Guiding Standards and Competencies
P#1	Administration and Policy	CAS Standards and the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies
P#2	Administration and Theory	ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies
P#3	Counseling, Student Development Theory and Administration	CACREP Standards and the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies

Curricular Influences on Preparation to Assist Grieving Students

This study included an examination of the three SAAP programs represented by each participant in correlation with participant responses. A cross comparative analysis helped to examine the structure, standards, program focus, and learning objectives. I chose two course topics to examine in each program due to the learning goals and objectives that are critical to the inquiry of this study: 1) helping skills and 2) student development theories. Four themes emerged from the document analysis of the syllabi from each program: helping skills, reflective practitioner, student development theory, and cultural competence. These themes also emerged in the coding analysis of the interview data in this section.

I asked each participant in what ways their masters programs prepared them for working with grieving students and if there were any specific student development theories that they found helpful while supporting a grieving student. The answers varied from vague to very specific applications in practice. Each of the participants referred to the helping skills that they

learned from their programs. However, P#2 and P#3 more clearly defined specific theories and articulated certain helping skills.

P#1's initial description of her program was "make sure that you always encourage students to use the resources that your university provides. You have to push them to use all these [resources], because they are going to need them in order to be successful." She also noted "there was definitely a little bit of helping skills, but not in a sense of grief and loss." This participant talked about theory in a general sense and said, "I think some of the theories that we had talked about... was that it's okay not to leave things at the door because they make up our whole identity, who we are, how we present ourselves, and how we can connect well with others." She used the term "leave things at the door" three times in the interview therefore I asked her to clarify the meaning behind that statement. She responded, "When you go into work you leave your baggage at the door." It then became clear that she was speaking about her professional and social identity as she shared "that was one thing that sticks with me that I learned the concept of identity." The practice of being a reflective practitioner who values not only her own identity but that of the student, which provides a solid foundation for a genuine connection.

Like P#1, P#2 had not received any specific training in grief and loss. Instead, she reflected on the importance of her helping skills training when assisting a grieving student. P#2 described an interpersonal skills course that she had taken in her first year. She described the course as:

It was a helping skills class, it wasn't specifically on grief, but it was about having your basic counseling and helping skills when working with students in a college environment. We learned a lot about active listening, we learned about reflecting back what the student

was saying to us. We talked about how to use silence. How to ask probing questions. Open ended, closed ended questioning, acknowledging what you're sensing from the conversation, what feelings might be arising within the student.

She also reflected on the types of theories that were part of her training. She said,

A lot of theories I learned were about overall student development theory, identity-based theories, behavior-based therapy... there is like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, of course, which that one kind of plays into a lot of things. Yes. But I guess you do see that, because a lot of what the student was facing was those baseline safety and security needs the sense of belonging.

P#2 reflected on keeping the needs of the students at the forefront while supporting them throughout the semester. She spoke of the self-reflection and growth exhibited by the students as they transitioned through their grief. The knowledge of student development theory helped this SAAP professional support this student during their transition through a grief loss. Although none of the participants had a specific course on grief and loss, aspects from other coursework in their education preparation are evident in their application of skills.

P#3 spoke about his graduate program with great passion. He began by sharing “the skills I learned within that program, allowed me to have success in working with students... it just helped me learn the skill of talking to students about uncomfortable situations.” He reflected on his time at the case study institution and the three roles he had filled there. His time in residence life gave him a great deal of experience with being the first point of contact with students facing a loss. When asked about student development theory he said, “I love Kohlberg. That is my go-to theory... looking at where the student at in their development, and sometimes where they're at in

their development is really going to be crucial on how we're going to be able to support.” He went on to describe the application of this theory by sharing:

In the one case with the grad student, based off my understanding, I knew where they were at [developmentally]. As a result, you pick and choose how you're going to process, and I didn't need to explain all the resources per se when he already knew it. However, looking at someone else, it might be very different... I use a kind of bland Kohlberg approach to just look at developmentally, where's the student is at to be able to gauge how we're going to support them and get them to where they need to go.

This quote illustrated the SAAP professional's ability to utilize theory to meet the needs of the student. He also referred to being a counselor, which was one of the focuses of his graduate program. He made a connection to his educational background while he spoke of a mentor from one of his roles at the Mid-Atlantic university. He recalled:

He taught me you can lead [students] to wherever they need to go, you can't force them. And I always think that as I always go back and forth, because as a counselor, what did I get into this for? I want to support students, I want to support people, I want to make the harm of this world be as least as I possibly can. I recognize that I can't take it all away. I don't have that magic button. But he also taught me, you also can't be more invested than the student is themselves, which means if they do not want to engage, unfortunately, all you can do is support, you can't force them to do anything.

As demonstrated throughout this section, all the participants assisted students in their transition through grief with the application of helping skills and knowledge. It is evident through the data that these SAAP professionals provided their assistance in many ways, and it may reflect the learning objectives of their preparation programs. While each participant gained

much knowledge from their programs, it is important to discuss some of their reflections on educational programs and professional development opportunities.

Gaps in Knowledge

This next section will summarize the participant's observations on education preparation programs omissions shared during the interview. While the question I asked them was meant to explore the knowledge and opportunities that helped prepare SAAP professionals to work with grieving students, it also revealed some gaps in the training of SAAP professionals to work with grieving students. The reported gaps were minimal, but two participants articulated significant aspects of their programs they felt were lacking.

Gaps in Own Knowledge. When P#1 was asked about how her education program prepared her to support a student navigating a grief loss she replied, "I don't think there was a whole lot of support when it came to that... there was definitely a little bit of helping skills, but not in a sense of grief and loss, or support of losing something or someone." She admitted "I never saw the connection of here is the skills of how to talk to someone through X, Y, and Z. But here is what you should do if you should get this student if they are not talking to people... [get them] involved in this blank program."

Upon further reflection of my student development theory question, P#2 shared that the student she helped continually throughout the semester "ended up later that year, identifying as non-binary and trans when they originally identified as female." She then stated, "We did not talk about that in my grad program, about how identity can be mixed up in a grief loss." She shared, "It was interesting to see how once the student kept processing grief and learn more about themselves that things changed. And they finally were able to see who they were." This student's identity formation related to their grief loss is impactful when examining it through the

transition theory lens. While P#1 and P#2 shared these gaps in their education programs, P#3 did not identify any gaps in the education program that he attended as his responses reflected that he feels truly fortunate to have had the counseling focus in his program.

Gaps in P#2 and P#3's graduate student supervisee knowledge emerged as a second category from the transcript data. These gaps included the graduate students currently enrolled in the case study institution's student affairs master's program. The next section shares the impressions of some of the participants.

Gaps in Supervisee Knowledge. P# 2 and P#3 who are currently supervising graduate students in their respective roles, verbalized their concern for missing skills in their graduate staff and further reflected on who is responsible for providing the training to fill any gaps. Both participants acknowledged that each student services office has a responsibility to assure proficiency in helping skills when working with students. It is important to note that P#2 and P#3's graduate programs had dedicated courses in the application of helping skills in conversations with students. The opportunity to be enrolled in this course could be critical to their responses. P#1 has not yet had the opportunity to supervise a graduate staff member or provide data on this subcategory.

P#2 spoke of one of her graduate interns who spoke with a student in a conduct meeting and did not recognize a portion of the conversation where that student reported she was a victim of sexual assault, which should have been reported to the CARE team. She stated she feels "their training in doing that is not there." She also shared her feelings on who should be responsible by saying "maybe we should start doing in our own grad training; of what happens if students bring up loss, grief crisis, any type of trauma in those spaces." She attributed being new to the field and learning along the way as factors that may inhibit offering support in student conversations

by saying, “I don't know if they have those indicators to even realize it because they're so nervous about just getting the meeting, right. Like, just make sure I write this in the meeting.” P#2's focus was how to get the current students the skills they need now. She spoke about the office's responsibility to provide training and resources so that students can meet the job expectations in their assistantship.

P#3 also provided this sentiment as he explained that graduate students, he has supervised come from a variety of graduate programs at the case study institution. He observed that the current SAAP graduate students are not adequately prepared to navigate helping conversations. He admitted he believes a counseling degree helps to a greater level. He stated, “I think that that is an additional layer of challenge here when looking at [training].” As he reflected further, he shared that “It's not always on the counselors to be able to do this work. And I don't know how to do this, but I think everyone [SAAP professional] needs a little bit of counseling in how we support these students.” The question now becomes how SAAP professionals and graduate students get training in grief and loss situations if it is not provided in their education preparation programs.

Professional Development Opportunities

One question in the semi structured interview protocol was dedicated to professional development. I asked the participants “How do your on-the-job training and professional development opportunities enhance your helping skills?” All three participants reported having no professional development opportunities related to student support with grief and loss. Each participant noted varied reasons for the absence of professional development opportunities at the case study institution. P#1 shared that her office supports seeking external professional development opportunities, but she has found nothing that connects with this topic. P#2 noted the

difference in training opportunities depending on the specific student services office in student affairs. She reflected on how her current office's training is geared toward her specific functional area, which is helpful, but she noted a lack of reinforcing helping or basic counseling skills. This is a stark difference compared to her last functional area (residence life), which provided more opportunities for their staff. This sentiment was echoed by P#3 as he shared "in regard to professional development in my current role, I don't think there is. I would love for there to be a little more, but at the moment, there's not." He did mention that he received enough professional development training during his four years with residence life.

All three participants reported that residence life at the case study institution had the greatest opportunities for additional training and professional development opportunities. Whether in a graduate or professional role, each participant experienced this common thread. All three participants also stated that they would have to seek out professional development opportunities on their own, and the case study institution does not require any specific quotas from their employees. P#1 shared that her office would provide funding to her if she found an opportunity she wanted to pursue. At the time of the study, she shared she had not found a program on grief and loss that she wanted to attend. P#2 and P#3 noted time constraints and staffing issues with their current roles as a barrier. They also indicated there is a need for training opportunities focusing on helping skills and crisis intervention.

Summary

The participants described specific helping skills used in conversations with students managing a grief loss and the values and competencies of a SAAP professional. The education preparation programs represented in this study gave participants varying levels of generic helping and cultural competence skills that they applied in their roles at the Mid-Atlantic

university. Each program analysis supported the difference in participant responses. Participants also described gaps in student affairs education programs and professional development opportunities that affect the professional's ability to have supportive conversations with students during a loss event. Chapter five presents discussions and implications of the results related to this study and highlights recommendations for the future of the Mid-Atlantic university.

Chapter 5

This qualitative study aimed to understand student affairs administration prepared (SAAP) professionals' reflections on their experiences while supporting grieving students. Specifically, to discover how their preparation programs and professional experiences at the case study institution prepared them to support students navigating the grief and loss process. This chapter begins with an overview of the study, followed by a discussion of the results that address the two research questions. This chapter also examines the limitations of this study and recommendations for future educational research and practice.

Summary of Study and Discussion of Results

This study explored student affairs administrative prepared professionals' experiences working with grieving students at one case study institution. A qualitative case study design using semi-structured interviews with three SAAP professionals and education program analysis provided rich data on contributing factors and the application of skills while supporting students in managing grief loss. In this study, I sought to answer two research questions to enhance my understanding of three SAAP professionals' individualized experiences and preparedness to work with grieving students at the case study institution. I asked questions that focused on their education preparation programs, professional development opportunities, and social identities in correlation to helping a student navigate a grief loss. The section below summarizes the two research questions and discusses the consistencies that emerged throughout the research process.

SAAP's Experiences Supporting Grieving Students: Research Question #1

The first research question was: "What are the experiences of student affairs administration master's prepared professionals at a Mid-Atlantic university supporting students navigating a grief loss?" Each participant shared their background in a prescreening phone call

when opting into the study, including years of service, student services roles, and education program focus. The responses to the first research question revealed similarities and differences which are important to the inquiry of this study. Below is a summary of each participant's experiences supporting a grieving student.

During her role in residence life, P#1 supported a student who had lost a sibling, which proved to be a very emotional task. This participant shared that she had suffered a similar loss and reflected on her ability to support a student while trying "trying to figure it [grief] out herself." She explained she had no coursework that prepared her to communicate with a student navigating a grief loss. Therefore, she worried about her emotions surfacing while working with this student. She spoke of lessons in communication that she learned from her mother, an educator, that she used to make the student feel comfortable while sharing their feelings. P#1 reported that her education program stressed the importance of providing students with campus resources. She was confident in her abilities to make referrals and provide resources to this student but expressed that she wished her graduate program provided more resources and training in helping skills. She said that one faculty member in her program gave her a book that she has kept and used frequently in her own grief experience and spoke with fondness about the positive impact that resource has had in her life.

P#1 also recounted an experience supporting another student in disability services, where she explained the type of loss had a different effect on her ability to apply helping skills. This student had lost a grandmother, and she shared it was easier to talk to this student and provide them with both support and strategies for personal and academic matters. While she reflected on this experience, she focused more on the atmosphere she created for the students to feel at ease when addressing stressful situations. She shared that creating a tranquil atmosphere was

important to her in her work, and she could see how the stress “washes away” when students walked into her office. P#1’s responses indicated that she did value the knowledge of student development theory she gained in her graduate program, as she mentioned applying the “leaving your bags at the door” concept to her work with grieving students. She spoke of being true to her feelings and acknowledging that it is “OK to not be OK.”

As this interview ended, P#1 shared her thoughts on wanting more resources and training specific to grief and loss for graduate students and professionals. I agree with these sentiments as mental health issues continue to rise among college students. Chapter Two shared Culpit et al.’s (2022) research that indicated roughly one-third of the average college student body would suffer the loss of an individual connected to them within twelve months, which rises to about one-half within twenty-four months. Grief, classified as a mental health issue, can affect a student's cognitive-behavioral, physical, spiritual, and interpersonal functioning (Balk, 2010). Parnell et al. (2021) indicated that addressing mental health issues is one of the top three areas of concern for administrators in higher education. Additionally, SAAP professionals anticipate an increased responsibility for navigating crisis management and counseling situations with students, which indicates the critical need for helping skills training.

P#2 also reflected on a significant experience supporting students managing a loss in their professional roles. She was employed in residence life at another institution during her first encounter with a grieving student. She discussed the helping skills she used while supporting this emotional student routinely throughout the semester. She articulated using micro skills to ensure their time spent together was productive. This participant seemed thankful to have learned helping skills in her graduate program, since it helped her guide communication with this student. She used silence and reflection when the student “was talking in circles.” These skills

proved beneficial for this SAAP professional as she could navigate conversations to support the student throughout the semester and could also provide referrals and resources when needed.

When discussing the progression of their working relationship, P#2 mentioned a transition the student made throughout the semester relating to their identity. She reflected on how she thought it was interesting that the students' process of grief allowed them to reflect on their own identity. P#2 stated she did not learn how grief can correlate with identity in her graduate program. This statement is impactful as it indicates a gap in the education preparation curriculum that should be considered for the future.

This participant also provided data that indicates a need for education and training focused on the impact of loss and student conduct issues. She stated, "you don't always think that behaviors are impacted by loss or grief, but they are," and shared that her current functional area did not have training on this topic. Losses from COVID-19 have touched many college students, and in order to properly provide support, student services offices need additional and expanded training. While all functional areas should participate in training opportunities, certain student services offices have an increased chance of working with grieving students. Residence life and student conduct are two student-facing offices where training on grief and loss should be mandatory.

P#3, who has similar professional experience in student services offices to P#2, shared the same point of view that these offices need more training in supporting grieving students. He displayed gratitude toward his education preparation program while sharing a few experiences where he assisted grieving students through support and strategies methods. He passionately spoke of these experiences, and he described the application of helping skills using words such as "crucial" and "critical" for a student experiencing a loss. He reflected on the increased mental

health issues post-pandemic and the possibility that for some students, returning to campus may be their first time they reach out for help. P#3 showed concern for newer SAAP professionals who may not have adequate preparation to support a grieving student and the damage that the student seeking help may endure. His roles have given him opportunities to see these types of situations, and he would like to see SAAP education preparation programs and student services offices provide training on grief and loss. P#3's point of view correlates with Cuyjet et al.'s (2009) research which recommended that SAAP professionals learn a wide range of skills, including counseling, to meet students' needs effectively.

The experiences of all three participants brought forth important things to consider on the varied opportunities SAAP professionals have to interact with grieving students. Their reflections and opinions are poignant in that they support the notion of SAAP professionals as front-line workers who make a difference in students' lives. It is important to discuss the work of SAAP professionals and how their application of skills and knowledge ensures student success. The next section will address the participants' responses about how they applied their skills and knowledge in practice.

SAAP Professionals' Application of Skills and Knowledge: Research Question #2

The second research question asked, "How do the same student affairs-prepared professionals apply skills and knowledge gained in their graduate programs to assist students navigating a grief loss?" The findings revealed that each participant gained knowledge of helping skills and student development theory from their respective education programs. The skills each participant reported varied, and some were more clearly related to their SAAP program focus. The data revealed that each participant used helping skills that Ivey et al. (2010) considers counseling micro skills. The skills of creating a safe space, active listening, reflection, and

empathy, and the use of silence appeared in the participants' reflections. The participants' responses also indicated where they had learned the "how to" of each micro skill.

P#1 spoke of learning empathy, active listening, and reflection from her mother when working with a grieving student. She used phrases that she had heard growing up to help the students feel more comfortable while sharing about their loss. P#2 and P#3 acknowledged learning their micro skills from an academic course in their graduate program and articulated the specific skills they used in practice with students. P#2 indicated that she utilized active listening, reflection, silence, and empathy to provide a productive and positive atmosphere with the grieving student throughout the entire semester. This student, who visited P#2 frequently, shared their feelings regarding multiple facets of their life while navigating the grief process. P#2 reflected on this student's growth throughout the grief process, which can relate to her ability to assist through support and strategies methods. P#3 shared his gratitude for the skills he learned within his graduate program. He referred to the client-centered approach he uses when working with a grieving student three times in the interview. The microskills he mentioned using were empathy, silence, and active listening to meet the student's needs. He also discussed applying student development theory and cultural competence to his work when developing strategies for the grieving student to cope with the loss.

A SAAP professional's cultural competence emerged as an important component when working with grieving students through the recognition that a loss event is individualized. The participants spoke of "meeting the student where they are at" and "recognizing that talking about grief is taboo" in some cultures which is critical to the methods of support and strategies provided by the SAAP professionals. Killam and Degges-White's (2017) research revealed student development theory provides the contextual framework for SAAP professionals'

understanding of student needs. The conversations and referrals the SAAP professionals mentioned reflect their application of knowledge. These examples also reflect the SAAP professionals' abilities to consider cultural competence to meet the needs of the student and help them cope with loss.

The participants reflected on skills and knowledge they had gained, as well as some areas, such as professional development and expanded resources, that needed more focus. The opinions of the two participants who served as supervisors for graduate staff in student services offices echoed this sentiment. The findings also indicated a lack of professional development training across functional areas in the case study institution. Interestingly, all three participants reported this for several reasons, including lack of time in their daily work schedule correlated to staff shortages, not finding grief-specific training, and not having the opportunities presented as part of their specific student service office. The participants' acknowledgement that the case study institution had no professional development requirements could significantly contribute to the data pertaining to the gap in SAAP professional knowledge and skill application.

Program Analysis and Interview Data Connections

The data from this study supported prior research that called for counseling skills training in student affairs preparation programs. Reynolds (2011) identified SAAP professionals as staff members that spend a sizable amount of time attending to the needs of distressed students facing mental health issues. One of the participants referred to SAAP professionals as "front-line" workers," as these professionals may be the first people on campus to whom a student reveals their loss. Reynolds (2011) stated that SAAP professionals have recurrent opportunities to provide support through their student service roles and that students with a wide range of issues view them as accessible. Each participant shared experiences that showcase similarities and

differences in their education training and roles within the case study institution. While the participants' backgrounds were diverse, their application of helping skills aligned with Reynold's (2011) research findings. The data revealed similarities in micro or helping skills applied in different functional areas and situations connected to a loss.

Triangulation of the data showed a common thread of basic helping skills as essential to the SAAP preparation programs. Each program's learning goals and outcomes described active listening, reflection, and empathy. The participants spoke about these skills as they recalled their experiences working with a grieving student. It is important to note the structure of the courses and the timing of the helping skills classes in each program. P#1's administration and policy-focused program had a blended course of academic learning and field experience. This course, which was taken in the second semester of the first year, did not provide the opportunity to acquire helping skills before practice. P#2's academic course in the second semester of her first year of the policy and student development theory-focused program allowed students to learn and practice helping skills in their cohort. In this course, described in the program's learning goals and outcomes, students gained experience in one-on-one and group interventions and skilled helping techniques. They also worked on the development of mentoring relationships with students. P#3 took three courses in the first year of his counseling, student development theory, and administration-focused-program that allowed him to learn the communication skills essential to helping relationships and the awareness of one's role in a group dynamic setting. The courses provided him with foundational knowledge of group dynamics, counseling skills and helping relationships.

The various levels of course concentration corresponded with the participants' reflections. P#1 shared that she had learned some basic helping skills in her program, but seemed

to focus more on the referral process and ensuring the student knew about resources on campus to get them involved. She used the words “push them to use the resources” to answer how your program prepared you to work with a student navigating a loss. She was successful in supporting the grieving student by providing on-campus resources, sharing her own experiences with grief, and using skills she identified to have been learned from her mother. P#2 referred to the one course requirement and shared examples of her application of helping skills applied when working with the student as a residence director. Her reflections mirrored the skills she learned in this course, and she gave specific examples of how she produced supportive mentoring moments while providing the student with resources and referrals throughout the semester. P#3 who had three courses on helping skills provided more feedback on the application of his skills when helping a grieving student. He referred to the application of specific skills he learned in his program several times and his ability to self-reflect while working with a grieving student in his various roles. The results showed that participants identified at least five core helping skills identified in Reynolds (2011) study.

During the program analysis, student development theory, reflective practitioner, and cultural competence also emerged as categories of importance in each curriculum. Each program embedded cultural competence and self-reflection learning goals within student development theory courses. Various course assignments in each program required students to self-assess development and growth to enhance their ability to become reflective practitioners. The student development theory courses had similar structures as the helping skills courses detailed above.

A crucial difference that emerged through the analysis of these programs related to the helping skills courses. The credit hour requirements, the timing of specific courses, and the structure of the course plans indicated that participants had the opportunity to learn and practice

helping skills before a field experience. Looking at these differences in program preparation from a broad perspective shows the varied methods of student support. Though the values and learning objectives were similar, each program's approach was different. The diversity among student affairs preparation programs results in professionals entering the field with individual strengths to offer students in need. McGill et al. (2021) discussed significant factors, such as the variety of roles and functional areas, that are catalysts for the different focuses of preparation programs. The impact of COVID-19, current SAAP professional staffing shortages, and the rise of student mental health issues also contribute to a need for various methods used when working with grieving students. The next section discusses the data supporting the application of helping skills through the chosen theoretical framework.

Application of Theoretical Framework to Findings

This section applies the findings of this study to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. This study sought insight into the experiences of SAAP professionals' knowledge and application of skills when assisting students as they transition through the grieving process. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Barclay, 2017) and the 4 S system served as the main framework for understanding how a SAAP professional can assist a grieving student.

Transition Theory

As discussed in Chapter 2, SAAP professionals often have student-facing roles, and students who suffered loss events often view them as accessible and approachable. A death loss can be an anticipated or unanticipated event that institutes a change of role or routine in an individual's life (Goodman et al., 2006). While the student experiences the loss, the SAAP professional can utilize knowledge and skills gained from their education preparation program to support students through the stages of moving in, moving through, and moving out. Anderson et

al.'s (2012) research emphasizes the capacity of role change is vital to the transition process. The knowledge and skills of a SAAP professional are very important when providing support during the emotional timeframe for the student. Schlossberg (2011) indicated that looking at the positive and negative attributes of the transition could help determine the course of action for navigating change. An individual's sense of well-being directly correlates with the quality of the support mechanisms during the transition process (Schlossberg, 2011). SAAP professionals' use of Schlossberg's 4 S system can assist a student's ability to move through the transition.

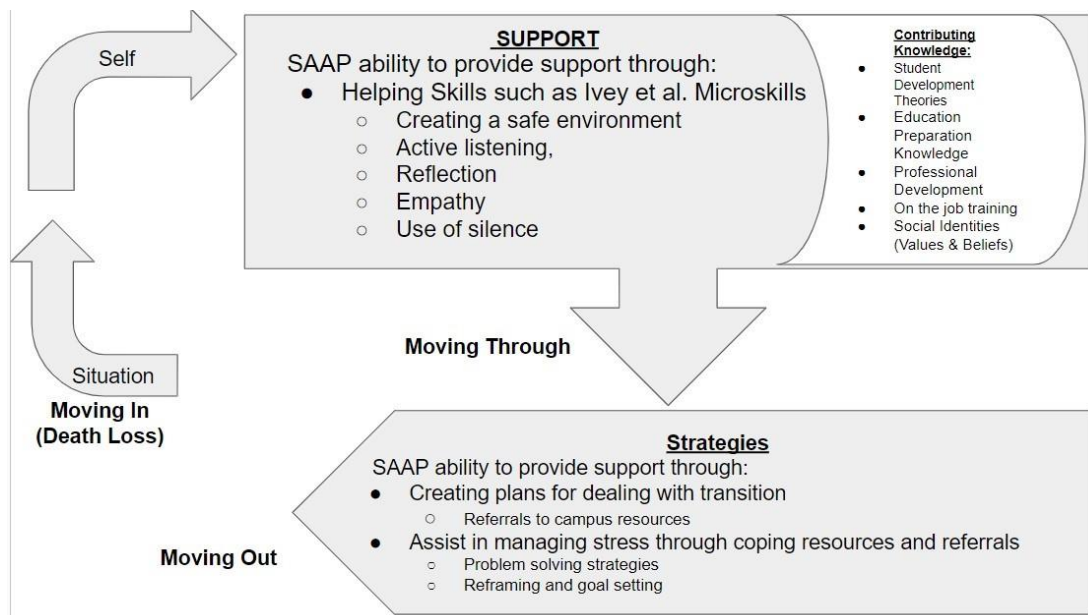
Transitions Through the 4 S System

The 4 S system is the explication of coping resources through the categories of self, situation, support, and strategies. This study focused on the application of support and strategies methods as foundational components of the theoretical framework. SAAP professionals can help students transition through loss via support interventions described by Ivey et al. (2010), student development and identity theories, and educational preparation training. The participants applied lower-level micro skills to help the students simultaneously navigate academic or personal tasks and grief. The SAAP professionals support methods were delivered using active listening, reflection, silence, and creating a safe space which empowered the student to share their loss. The SAAP professionals helped the students adapt to their transitions by recognizing the symptoms and behaviors related to grief and developing recommendations that fit their individualized needs. Schlossberg (2011) recommended developing goals through problem solving strategies and resources to navigate unpredictable times, which can lead to a sense of control. In this study, the SAAP professionals provided strategies or interventions through the dissemination of appropriate resources in a timely manner to meet their students' needs.

Figure 4 represents the addition of Ivey et al.'s (2010) Microskills Hierarchy that the

participants used during support interventions as well as strategies methods more like a case management model discussed in Chapter 2. Adams et al.'s (2014) research focused on how the case management model, which utilizes referrals, could benefit higher education institutions as more education preparation programs move away from counseling-based programs and align with student affairs foundational standards. This study's data also provides support for adopting a case management model in correlation with short staffing in counseling centers and the increase in college student mental health issues. The ability to provide resources to students managing grief is aligned with strategies and methods in the 4 S system. SAAP professionals can assist in creating plans to manage the transition through grief which is helpful in student retention efforts.

Figure 4

Schlossberg with Ivey et al. Micro skills

This study has also indicated that the recognition of the students' developmental stage could either enhance or inhibit the process of moving through the transition. One participant spoke of how he learned to accommodate student needs based on his application of a student development theory. This recognition allowed him to successfully navigate the student to the resources and referrals they needed for success. Although confidence levels varied in the application of helping skills it is important to recognize that all the SAAP professionals interviewed were able to use both support strategies and interventions regardless of the emphasis of their preparation program.

Limitations of the Study

This study had limitations within the methodology and analysis. The limitations of this intrinsic case study methodology design are directly related to conducting the study at one

institution and time constraints. Regarding the data analysis, the program analysis reflected only a few of the courses in the curriculum sequence, and included no professional development training on this topic, as the participants noted that did not influence their experiences.

Limitations in Methodology

The intrinsic case study methodology is exploratory in nature. This study was conducted at one Mid-Atlantic university, and the unit of analysis focused on a small group of professionals who met a specific set of criteria and worked within student services offices. The inclusion criteria produced a very limited number of eligible participants. As noted in Chapter Three, 75% of the initial respondents did not meet the inclusion criteria, prompting the researcher to send out additional calls for participation with snowball sampling verbiage included. The timing of the study also affected the response rate as potential participants received it at the end of the semester, directly before winter break. While the staff were still working during this timeframe, I received many out-of-office replies. The three participants who met the requirements of the study had different lengths of tenure at the case study institution and in the field of student affairs. P#3 had eight years of experience to draw upon at the case study institution, where P#1 and P#2 had less than two years in a professional role at the case study institution at the time of the study. Additionally, once there were enough participants, the study had to conclude within a five-month time frame to meet my doctoral program's requirements. Lastly, the various levels of experience in the field and at the Mid-Atlantic University made it difficult to draw conclusions about the influences on staff preparation to work with grieving students.

Limitations in Analysis

This study analyzed the education preparation programs of each participant represented. Analysis of the program focus, number of credits, field experiences, course curriculum, and

sequence provided data on the similarities and differences in the preparation of student affairs staff employed at the Mid-Atlantic University. Due to the time constraints for completion of this study, I chose to examine two to three courses from each program. These courses were chosen when themes from the interview coding cycles were completed. The chosen courses had differences in structure that made it difficult to complete a full analysis of skills participants gained through their respective programs. This may be due to the standards and core curriculum guidelines set by each program.

One intention of this study was to explore professional development training as an additional layer of validity. The participants' responses indicated no professional development opportunities on grief and loss were presented and suggested future training would be beneficial. While it is unfortunate that these SAAP professionals did not have professional development experiences to prepare them to meet the needs of grieving students, it is an important piece of data. This speaks to the need for increased preparation of staff to meet the needs of a growing number of grieving students in the post-pandemic era.

Implications

The study's findings have many implications for the future of this case study institution's efforts to prepare SAAP professionals to work with grieving students. Participant reflections on experiences and observations about their preparation to work with grieving students presented in this study may allow for further research on SAAP professionals' abilities to work with grieving students and the education preparation and professional development that would provide the

appropriate tools for success.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Educational Research

The return to campus from the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many institutions of higher education to make changes to academic programs, out of classroom experiences, and staffing structures. The recruitment process and findings from my study indicated the individuals employed in student services roles have varied education backgrounds that reach outside of a traditional student affairs preparation program. The offices categorized as “student services” have one central mission which is to contribute to the development and wellbeing of the student. McGill et al.’s (2021) study identified the difficulties in uniting the practitioners in this field due to the vast number of roles and functional areas within different institutions. A study that focuses on the SAAP professionals who do not hold master’s degrees in student affairs would expand the opportunity to understand the essential skills needed for success in their roles.

The participants who self-selected into this study included individuals who had obtained a student affairs degree and were employed at the case study institution. I was fortunate to find three participants who obtained graduate degrees from programs with different focuses but acknowledge the fact that my participant pool was small due to the limitations of the intrinsic case study design. Along with examining SAAP professionals with various degrees, adopting a study design that allows participants from numerous institutions to participate would allow for a more diverse participant pool. The opportunity to gather data addressing different pathways to becoming a SAAP professional and the influence of time accumulated in the professional would increase the ability to provide comparisons. These two recommendations would allow the

researcher to capture the experiences and observations of a wider demographic to contribute to the development of SAAP professionals.

Finally, my study also identified a gap in professional development training at the case study institution. While each participant acknowledged that they would be supported in seeking professional development opportunities, they reported not being able to partake for various reasons. Therefore, I recommend that researchers design a study to compare professional development training presented as well as completed by each functional area to address any access issues across the campus. Higher education institutions can only benefit from employing professionals who have the necessary skills to meet the needs of their student population. A deeper dive into the acquisition of these skills is essential as we move toward our new sense of normal post COVID-19.

Implications for Educational Practice

Through this study, I have shown how SAAP professionals can be essential front-line staff who make an impact on student lives, especially since SAAP professionals spend a sizable amount of time attending to the needs of students facing mental health issues (Reynolds, 2011). Reynolds (2011) also indicated that while SAAP professionals are not trained counselors, they have roles that require them to engage in supporting students through events that would cause a student to move through a transition. All three participants acknowledged having no formal training on loss and grief in relation to working with students. Each shared experiences of applying appropriate helping skills, but also commented that they would like to see more opportunities to learn and reinforce their helping skills. This case study has shown that student services offices would benefit from professional development training that focuses on how to

support students who are managing a grief loss. Therefore, implementing grief and loss specific training opportunities on campus would be beneficial.

Additionally, the participants identified they would appreciate more resources around the application of basic helping skills during difficult conversations with students. Providing a standardized set of professional development requirements for student services offices would contribute to all SAAP professionals acquiring additional knowledge. Auerbach et al. (2018) indicated hardships among college campuses providing resources to meet the increased demand for counseling services. The high turnover rate in counseling centers reported by the AUCCCD (2021) indicated a need for alternative staff to provide resources. Many of the roles in each functional area offer opportunities to collaborate with other departments, which may increase the probability of working with different students in various capacities. Cuyjet et al.'s (2009) research indicated that SAAP professionals should learn a wide range of skills, including counseling, to meet students' needs successfully. Providing all offices with the same opportunities and standards will provide consistency of competencies in all student services functional areas.

While a vast amount of research on mental health and grief has recently arisen, the research on the application of helping skills by SAAP professionals when providing grief support is minimal. I recommend further studies on the importance of helping skills in student affairs preparation programs. This study provided only a glimpse of the impact a SAAP professional can have at one institution. The participants' experiences and suggestions reflect the importance of helping skills in their roles on campus. The rise in mental health issues and post-pandemic fallout are two prominent elements in the atmosphere of higher education institutions across the nation. Campaigns for acceptance of mental health issues encourage students to seek out help for

the first time. I also recommend focused research on raising awareness of mental health issues due to grief and loss on campus. One of the participants spoke of the increase in student mental health issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic and made a significant point about the amount of “baggage” they are bringing with them back to campus. Therefore, comprehensive research on the need for interventions at a community level and individual level would determine the most successful models for students as well as the institution.

Summary

This study provided evidentiary support that a need for counseling skills for SAAP professionals exists. This chapter provided a summary of that support, correlations to my theoretical framework, an overview of limitations, and recommendations for future educational research and practice on SAAP professionals skills in practice.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Ehinger Annex
West Chester, PA 19383 | 610-436-3557 | www.wcupa.edu

Jul 25, 2022 12:24:11 PM EDT

To: Lenora Mitchell
Col of Education & Social Work, Counselor Education

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2022-373 Student Affairs Professionals Experiences Supporting Students through Grief and Loss: A Qualitative Study

Dear Lenora Mitchell:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Student Affairs Professionals Experiences Supporting Students through Grief and Loss: A Qualitative Study .

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155

Appendix B

Letter to the Directors

Greetings,

I hope this email finds you well. I am Ann Mitchell, a current Policy, Planning, and Administration doctoral student at West Chester University. I am conducting a research study to examine the experiences of student affairs professionals as it relates to supporting students navigating a grief loss. I would like to extend a call for participation in my doctoral research to you and your staff.

Participation in this study involves one interview (that can be conducted in person or virtually) and a review of the interview transcription. Could you share the call for participants letter (Please see attached.) with your staff?

This study has been approved by the West Chester University Institutional Review Board, Protocol FY 2022-23.

I would be happy to discuss the study further and answer any questions or concerns. You can reach me at lm143677@wcupa.edu.

Best,

Ann Mitchell

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Dear West Chester University Staff Member,

I am Ann Mitchell, a current Policy, Planning, and Administration doctoral student at West Chester University. I would like to extend a call for participation in my doctoral research for the Policy, Planning, and Administration program. I am conducting a research study to examine the experiences of student affairs professionals as it relates to supporting students navigating a grief loss. Participation in this study involves one interview (that can be conducted in person or virtually) and a review of the interview transcription.

What is this study about?

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of student affairs professionals as it relates to supporting students navigating a grief loss. This study also seeks to understand Student Affairs professionals' reflections on their preparation of skills associated with supporting students navigating a grief loss.

What will I have to do?

Participants will be asked to:

- Fill out a consent form
- Participate in a 60-minute interview
- Complete a 25-minute review of data transcription material

Where do I have to go?

Participants can choose from a virtual Zoom or in-person interview modality.

Who can participate?

- Individuals who have graduated from a minimum of a student affairs master's preparation program.
- Current Full-Time Staff member at West Chester University.
- You have supported at least one student who was/is navigating a grief loss

This study has been approved by the West Chester University Institutional Review Board, Protocol FY 2022-23.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating in this study, please contact Ann Mitchell at lm143677@wcupa.edu.

Please feel free to forward this email to any staff member you feel might fit the participation criteria and are willing to contribute to this research.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ann Mitchell

Appendix D

Qualtrics Consent Link Content

Request to Participate in EDD Research

Q1 This form serves as a recruitment tool for a research study conducted at West Chester University. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of student affairs professionals as it relates to supporting undergraduate and graduate students who are navigating a significant grief loss. This study also seeks to understand Student Affairs professionals' perceptions of how masters preparation programs influence skills utilized in the navigation process.

The researcher is looking for participants who have met the following criteria:

1. Have had to graduate from a Student Affairs masters preparation program.
2. Current Staff at West Chester University
3. Have supported at least one student who was/is navigating a loss experience

Participants will be asked to:

1. Fill out a consent form and contact information survey
2. Participate in a 60-minute interview with the possibility of another short interview if questions arise.
3. Complete an estimated 25-minute review of data transcription material.

If you feel that you meet the inclusion criteria and would like to participate in this study that will take an estimated 95 minutes of your time please complete this form.

Q7 Consent form:

Project Title: Examining student affairs administration prepared staff experiences supporting students who are facilitating a significant loss: A Qualitative Study

Investigator(s): Lenora Mitchell; Kathryn Alessandria

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Lenora Mitchell as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to examine the experiences of Student Affairs professionals as it relates to supporting undergraduate and graduate students who have experienced a significant loss event. This study also seeks to understand Student Affairs professionals' reflections on confidence levels with skills associated with supporting students navigating grief associated with loss.

Your participation will take about 95 minutes (about 1 and a half hours). 10 minutes to complete the email sent with a consent form, 60 minutes to participate in an in-person interview, and 25 minutes to read over transcribed interview data for accuracy.

The minimal risk(s) of this study are loss of confidentiality and discomfort in answering some questions that pertain to a sensitive topic. There is no potential benefit to this study. The research project is being done by Lenora Mitchell as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to examine the experiences of Student Affairs professionals as it relates to supporting undergraduate and graduate students who have experienced a significant loss event. This study also seeks to understand Student Affairs professionals' reflections on confidence levels with skills associated with supporting students navigating grief associated with loss.

You may ask Lenora Mitchell any questions to help you understand this study. If you do not want to be a part of this study, it will not affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study? Examine the experiences of Student Affairs professionals as it relates to supporting undergraduate and graduate students navigating a significant loss event. This study also seeks to understand Student Affairs professionals' reflections on confidence levels with skills associated with supporting students navigating grief associated with loss.

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following: Complete Qualtrics survey with contact information and consent form Participate in an in-person or virtual interview Read over transcribed interview data for accuracy

This study will take an estimated 95 minutes (about 1 and a half hours) of your time. Are there any experimental medical treatments? No Is there any risk to me? The potential risks of this study are loss of confidentiality and discomfort in answering some questions that pertain to a sensitive topic If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

Is there any benefit to me? There are no benefits to this study.

How will you protect my privacy? The semi-structured interview will be audio recorded. Your records will be private. Only Lenora Mitchell, Kathryn Alessandria, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses. Your name will not be used in any reports. Records will be stored: Password Protected File/Computer The files will be permanently deleted one year after completion Records will be destroyed three years after completion of study.

Do I get paid to take part in this study? No

Who do I contact in case of research related injury? For any questions about this study, contact:
Primary Investigator: Lenora Mitchell at 610-724-1171 or lm143677@wcupa.edu Faculty
Sponsor: Kathryn Alessandria at 610-436-3976 or kalessandria@wcupa.edu

What will you do with my Identifiable Information/Biospecimens? All identifiable information will be store in a password protected program and password protected computer.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

By clicking the "YES" button you are indicating that I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

- Agree to Consent Form (1)
- Do NOT Agree with Consent Form (2)

Q11 Name:

Q12 Click to write the question text

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:

The participant and I will set the interview date and time.

- If in-person, a mutually agreeable location will be set.
- If the Zoom option is chosen, the researcher will send the participant a secure link and passcode via email with instructions for the day of the interview. This will include notice that a private location must be obtained, and the participant and researcher will pan the room before the interview starts.)

Tasks before the interview starts:

- Do you have any consent form questions?
- Do I have your permission to record?
- I will audio record this interview, and the data will be transcribed into a word document format. The researcher will send you to read for accuracy or clarification if needed.
- Please let me know if you need to stop the interview at any time.
- Recap of the study: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of student affairs professionals as it relates to supporting undergraduate and graduate students who are navigating a grief loss. This study also seeks to understand Student Affairs professionals' reflections on their preparation of skills associated with supporting students navigating a grief loss.
- For this study, grief will be defined as a personal experience of loss, including physical or emotional symptoms. A loss refers to the harm or privation resulting from losing or being separated from someone or something.

Questions:

1. What is your current role at the university? And what does your student interaction look like for this role?
2. Can you tell me about a time you supported a student navigating a grief loss?
3. How did your master's program prepare you to work with students navigating a grief loss? Were there specific student development theories that were helpful?
4. What helping skills did you find most important when helping a student manage a loss?
5. How can an individual's beliefs and values impact communication with students experiencing a loss event? What are the ways in which your social identities inform the way you support students?

6. How do your on-the-job training and professional development opportunities enhance your helping skills?