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The Institutional Response to the Unexpected Death of an Undergraduate Student in a Private, Faith-Based College: An Interpretive Case Study

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The Institutional Response to the Unexpected Death of an Undergraduate Student in a
Private, Faith-Based College: An Interpretive Case Study

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

Karen M. Lange

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Doctor of Education and hereby approve the dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

A student death on a college or university campus has far-reaching effects on the campus community. Not only does the death impact the family of the student, but also the friends, roommates, professors, and staff who knew the student. Many institutions of higher education have developed protocols and processes for responding to a student death. The response efforts may include the immediate attention to the death itself and also a response to the emotional impact a student death has on the campus. In addition to the immediate response, some colleges and universities have established scholarships, awards, and memorials in remembrance of the former student. This interpretive case study captured the collective stories of staff members from one faith-based college that responded to various student deaths over a span of several years. The themes that emerged from those stories are about the building of the eternal, visual memorial; the involvement of the campus community; the president as the comforter of the community; remembering all students; and moving on after the death of a student.

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CHAPTER 1

Background and Researcher Interest

Working as a dean of students and cochairing the university crisis-response team at a midsize, private, religiously affiliated university for over a decade, I have been involved in responding to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student several times. Whether the student has died from an illness, suicide, car accident, or an alcohol- or drug-related incident, each death has had an impact on the members of the campus. In my experience, no matter what the circumstances of the death, the response from the university leaves a lasting impression on both the student's family and the campus community.

Many institutions of higher education have developed emergency policies and plans, which include protocols for responding to student death. Similar to my institution, they may have developed plans due to crises on their own campus or in compliance with federal mandates passed in recent years (Hemphill & LaBanc, 2010). At my present institution, the current practice includes a coordinated institutional response, which is systematic and also captures the individual mission of the institution. The response of an institution is often reflective of the individuality of that particular college or university. As one set of authors (Wesener, Peska, & Treviño, 2010) pointed out, "The care and support of the campus community displayed in the aftermath of a tragedy reveals the strength, resolve and true character of an institution" (p.115).

As a student affairs professional for my entire career, some of my most challenging and difficult moments have been responding to the death of a student. One of my mentors wrote in the foreword of a book, "No one pursues a profession in student

affairs for times such as these” (Dungy & Roberts, 2010, p. xiv). Although this quote is in reference to all types of campus crises, it personally resonates for me because of my own experience in responding to death on campus.

Because I work at a religiously affiliated university, I was particularly interested in studying and understanding the experience of how another faith-based institution responds to the death of an undergraduate student. Understanding the institutional response to a student’s death was the focus of my study.

Statement of the Problem

The traditional age of undergraduate students ranges from 18 to 24 years. It is not unusual for students of this age group to participate in high-risk behaviors (Hayes, Pistorello, & Levin, 2013). Accidents, health-related illnesses, suicide, and high-risk behavior may lead to the unexpected death of a college student (Balk, 2011).

When responding to the death of a student, institutions of higher education face administrative challenges because of their complex organizational and operational structures, decision-making practices, and governances (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In addition, due to the emotional development of traditional-aged undergraduate students, student death on college and university campuses presents some unique challenges in responding to the emotions and grief in the campus community (McCauley & Powell, 2007).

It is important that institutions of higher education are prepared to respond to the death of a student by establishing a protocol and responding in an appropriate manner for their institution. There is general information and best practices available to institutions of higher education on how best to respond organizationally. In particular, for a student

death, the research supports creating a crisis planning and response team who in turn will establish and implement checklists, policies, and overall protocols for dealing with the death of a student (Callahan & Fox, 2008; McCauley & Powell, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). These procedures and policies should cover what to do when you first find out about the death of the student, the immediate aftermath of the death, and any long-term remembrances. In my experience, in addition to the checklists, policies, and protocols, it is essential to provide care and resources for the family and campus community, so they feel supported as they deal with their grief. For some, the care and resources may be linked to one's faith and beliefs (Balk, 2011).

I assume a faith-based institution has a better sense in providing holistic support to grieving families and campus communities; however, I could not find many articles that would address the response to a student's death in a faith-based institution. Thus, the holistic understanding of a faith-based institution's response to a student's death is needed to fill in a gap in research on such a delicate issue.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe a private, faith-based institutional response to the death of a student. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how the campus community and institution's administration responded to a student's death, including procedures, policies, and actions along with their response to the feelings and emotions of the campus community. The research question that guided the study was, What is the institutional response to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student at a private, faith-based college?

Significance of the Study

A student death on a college campus clearly impacts the family of the deceased, and also many friends, staff, faculty, and administrators on the campus itself. By studying one private, faith-based college, I gained in-depth insights and understanding of how one campus responded to a student's death, which in turn will contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic.

According to Rollo and Zdiarski (2007), campuses need to be prepared to deal with a myriad of different crisis situations with protocols for different scenarios. Campuses may develop overall crises management plans that are adaptable to all different types of situations. Because of the frequency of college student deaths (Cintrón 2007), it is critical that campuses develop a specific protocol for this particular event. Callahan and Fox (2008) indicate the protocol itself can be a checklist that involves the necessary steps, such as contacting the appropriate personnel and offices on campus. The essential steps are critical and should be followed; however, in my experience, what is remembered by the family and community members is both the individual and unique response from the institution. Therefore, in addition to the organizational response, I studied the distinctive response of the experience of a college student death at a private, faith-based school. By using a case study methodology, I now holistically came to understand one college's response to an unanticipated death of an undergraduate student.

Definition of Common Terms

Division of Student Affairs. The staff members who comprise the Division of Student Affairs provide services and programs that support and enhance the student experience outside the classroom, with the focus being on student development. Student

affairs staff typically provide leadership for student crises on university campuses (Kuk, 2012; LaBanc, Krepel, Johnson, & Herrmann, 2010; Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007).

Private institution of higher education. For the purpose of this study, I used the definition from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities National Profile (2011), which indicates that one hallmark of private colleges, is that they are known for providing a personal experience for students offering a variety of student services and faculty and staff who care about the students.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, I found several books and many articles regarding campus emergencies. In particular, since the tragedies at Virginia Tech in 2007, there has been an increase in information published on developing protocols and plans for dealing with crisis management in higher education. Specifically, the U.S. Department of Education has created a comprehensive guide for all institutions of higher education listing specific guidelines, resources, and training exercises (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

I focused my search specifically on the death of an undergraduate student. Much of the information came from books and articles specifically written by student affairs professionals, and endorsed by the two main student affairs professional organizations: College Student Educators International and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. A review of the Web sites of both of these professional organizations resulted in additional resources, as well as the review of relevant dissertations. The literature review included information on the policies and protocols of responding to a student death, as well as responding to grief and bereavement of the family and campus community members. Information ranged from overall general responses to specific details and suggestions.

I then organized the information by first considering why it is important that institutions of higher education establish policies and protocols for responding to a student death. Many practices and policies that develop or evolve at colleges and universities reflect the values of the institution (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006).

After I established the importance of the role the institution plays in responding to a student's death, I then organized the material in chronological order of what I believe are the critical issues colleges and universities face when responding to the death of a student. These topics include developing protocol for the death of a student, the value of a crisis team response, responding to grief, and, finally, establishing opportunities for remembering students who have died. The Literature Review is organized in this order.

Why the Institution's Response Matters

In higher education, the role of the institution with undergraduate students is to provide an environment of growth and development for undergraduate students (Balk, 2011; Skipper, 2005). In particular, since the field of student affairs has become more well established at American colleges and universities, staff have been more involved in the holistic development of students and their learning, both inside and outside of the classroom (Chickering et al., 2006; Kuk, 2012). There are several theories on student development theory outlining the growth and changes that students go through during their college years and how programs and services at universities and colleges can and do enhance that interpersonal and intrapersonal development (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Skipper, 2005). The developmental years of a traditional-age undergraduate student are often seen as a time of maturation and a bridge from late adolescence to young adulthood. Students go through developmental stages as they develop their independence and autonomy as young adults (Jones & Abes, 2013; Skipper, 2005).

Staff and faculty at higher education institutions have both the opportunity and responsibility for educating and interacting with undergraduate students during these developmental years. In addition, many institutions of higher education have the

infrastructures in place to provide support and psychological intervention to help shape the lives of students (Hayes et al., 2013). Rollo and Zdiarski (2007) found that for educators in higher education, and specifically for student affairs professionals, there is a responsibility for care for the students on our campuses. Student affairs professionals tend to be involved in the lives of students as advisors, counselors, health care providers, mentors, and supervisors. Because of the nature of the relationship that staff and faculty at colleges and universities have developed with their students, it is critical that campuses develop emergency plans that include protocols for responding to student death that include both an organizational response and a response to the emotional impact of the death.

Developing Protocol for the Death of a Student Including Campus Crisis Teams

Much of the information regarding developing policies and protocols concerning the death of a student includes both what to do immediately when one becomes aware of the student death and how to respond long term. Several sources recommend developing and activating the campus crisis team in the event of a student death (Callahan & Fox, 2008; McCauley & Powell, 2007; Zdziarski, Rollo, & Dunkel, 2007). The multidisciplinary campus crisis team can then appropriately respond to all of the necessary details in the institution's coordinated response. Campus crisis teams take the pressure off of one person or one department when making decisions, and having a team of people with different expertise strengthens the decision making (Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007; LaBanc et al., 2010). Responding to a crisis takes time and emotional energy; therefore, the relevance of a team approach is critical when responding to a campus disaster or grave incident, such as a student death (Callahan & Fox, 2008;

McCauley & Powell, 2007). The team, which is typically comprised of staff/faculty and administrators from across the institution, is generally guided by key principles which reflect the values and nature of the institution (Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007). No matter who is involved in the team, the key elements that contribute to the success of the team response are communication, clear identification of roles, flexibility and knowledge of campus resources, and training (LaBanc et al., 2010; McCauley & Powell, 2007; Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The multidisciplinary team will take on several roles and responsibilities during the immediate aftermath of a student death, and beyond. The team will ensure that they follow their established policies and protocols, which include properly responding to the family, disseminating the appropriate information, and responding to the media and the community (LaBanc et al., 2010; McCauley & Powell, 2007). In addition, they will communicate with the suitable departments on campus and appropriate local authorities if necessary (Dunkel & Stump, 2007; Wrenn, 1999). Clear and accurate communication to all of the appropriate campus members, the family, and outside community is important in order to avoid misinformation about the individual or the situation itself (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Responding to Grief

One of the roles that one or more members of the crisis response team may assume is responding in a caring and appropriate manner to the family of the deceased student. If the institution does make the initial contact with the family, it is critical the contact person is appropriately trained on how to share the necessary and difficult information with the family members (Hamilton, 2008). The institutional staff member

who contacts the family should be prepared to share any pertinent and appropriate information that they have regarding the death of the student, the circumstances surrounding the death, and any other relevant information that they may know about the student (Hamilton, 2008; Weathers, 2007).

According to Weathers (2007), it is common knowledge amongst grief counselors that the loss of a child is devastating and considered the most difficult loss to overcome. Clearly, the first contact with the family is critical. If the institutional representative does not make the initial contact, the person certainly will be involved in the immediate next steps and respond to the family when they arrive on campus (Hamilton, 2008). As difficult as this communication with the family is, it is essential that the staff and administrators in this role are prepared to respond in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Weathers (2007) wrote, “While the family may appear shocked to the point of numbness, it is unlikely they will forget how they were treated on your campus” (p. 39). It is also important that the institutional members involved with the family are aware of other information about the student: Was he or she an international student, a resident student or a student athlete, or involved in some particular role on campus (Weathers, 2007)? Any information the university gathers will help not only with communication with the family, but assist in making plans to reach out to specific populations of students on the campus who may be connected to the student (Callahan & Fox, 2008; Weathers, 2007).

The campus crisis team may want to assign a liaison to the grieving family (Hamilton 2008; LaBanc et al., 2010). The staff member assigned to this role will not only be able to provide information, resources, and support, but will be able to communicate information back to the crisis management team and develop a long term

relationship with the family, as other issues may emerge in the future (Callahan & Fox, 2008). Developing a respectful and caring relationship with the family is important, and communicates that the student was valued at the institution (Hamilton, 2008). Being responsive to the family and honoring their requests is of the utmost importance following a death of a student (Redden, 2007).

In addition to responding to the family members of the student who has died, the institution will need to respond to other students such as roommates, friends, classmates, and acquaintances (Vickio, 2008). Friends play a crucial role in the lives of undergraduate students; therefore, if the death involves a roommate or a classmate, the daily life of that student will be interrupted and drastically changed (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010).

One set of authors specifically defines later adolescence as the years between 18 and 22, and states that dealing with bereavement during these years may inhibit the maturational phase of adolescence (Balk & Corr, 2009). Traditional-age undergraduate college students are facing many changes in their lives and progressing through different stages of development. A death may impact additional transitions for students and, depending on their own developmental processes, it may impact their individual growth and impact their academic careers (Balk, 2001; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Grief is difficult to cope with and not everybody handles it well (Bonanno, 2009). One's community can help with the grieving and healing process (Boss, 2006); therefore, it is essential for colleges and universities to provide opportunities for students to grieve. Providing occasions for students to deal with loss helps them normalize their feelings, as well as understand the thoughts and feelings they are experiencing ("In Search of Safer

Communities,” 2008; Vickio, 2008). In addition to providing opportunities for students to grieve, colleges and universities can train staff and faculty members in responding to grief and how to recognize when a person is grieving. One set of authors, suggested some basic training and practical guidelines for staff and faculty interfacing with bereaved students. The training includes understanding the basic stages of grief as well as training on practical suggestions. Practical training may include role-playing on how to engage in conversations with grieving students through active listening skills and supportive interactions which validate their feelings (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

Many campuses employ health care providers and counselors who can offer basic training to faculty and other staff members on how to recognize students who are grieving. Staff and faculty members may have more life experience with loss and grief than a traditional age undergraduate student therefore may have more empathy for the grieving student than their peers (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). A campus can provide support groups, planned interventions, and educational programs on grief (Balk, 2011). In addition to resources within the campus community, some campuses may benefit from working with local and religious-based organizations in the public community so students will have resources related to their own faith (“In Search of Safer Communities,” 2008).

Another issue the university administration will want to review will be the academic policies for students. Students who are grieving may need flexibility in their course work or in withdrawing from a class; therefore, some schools have developed bereavement policies (Balk, 2011). Policies related to death may be influenced by the specific nature of the institution (Owens & Garlough, 2007), and may provide flexibility

for grieving students. Having policies in place can assist students in their grieving processes.

In summary, the response from the institution's personnel both to the grieving family and community members is critical. The institution's policies, culture, and individual members reflect the nature of the institution to the family and community members during a very difficult time of misfortune. The creation and training of the crisis response team and all responding personnel contribute to a sensitive and organized response during a very difficult time for the student's family and the university or college community.

Remembrance of the Student

When preparing for the aftermath of a student death, the campus administrators need to prepare for both the potential spontaneous response of a makeshift memorial (if it is a tragic death), and also the potential for more long-term remembrances, such as memorials, endowed scholarships, tributes, and posthumous degrees or awards (Redden, 2007; Weber & Garlough, 2007; Wesener et al., 2010). Colleges and universities should institute policies and procedures to address each type of memorial so the institution can appropriately respond to requests from friends and family members of the deceased. (Owens & Garlough, 2007; Wesener et al., 2010).

With spontaneous memorials, it is important to determine how long an institution will keep materials and what to do with them after they are removed from the site (Grider, 2007; Wesener et al., 2010). Grider (2007) referenced her personal experience of working with community members in cataloging and preserving every item that was

left behind at a memorial site. Having guidelines in place that addresses this issue will assist in respectfully responding to materials left behind.

Friends and family members may find comfort during their grief by initiating ideas about how best to remember their loved one. Any long-term efforts that may include scholarships or monetary contributions that result in dedications and memorials will most likely include the staff from the department on campus that does fund-raising and development (Weber & Garlough, 2007). Specific awards may involve individual departments on campus.

Institutions of higher education may or may not have a way of memorializing students who have died while attending their institution. The circumstances of the death or the influence of the particular student may impact how the university or college responds (Griffin, 2007). Certainly, in the immediate aftermath of a death, a memorial service can be healing (Wesener et al., 2010). In addition, Weber and Garlough (2007) wrote about institutions that have planted trees, constructed memorials, or provided some other tangible reminder of a student who has died while attending the institution. Any visible and permanent memorial should be planned carefully, in particular if it is in response to a tragic death or even the anniversary of a tragic event (“In Search of Safer Communities,” 2008; Wesener et al., 2010).

It will be important that the institution have clear policies in place as well as transparent communication with the family so they can respond both appropriately and sensitively as they are preparing for any short-term and long-term remembrances of the student (Weber & Garlough, 2007; Wesener et al., 2010).

Summary

After reviewing the literature, it was clear that having a protocol and policies in place to respond to an undergraduate student death on a college campus is crucial. Student death is a reality on college and university campuses, and the administration needs to be prepared to respond to death in their campus community. In addition, during a crisis situation, the staff, faculty, and administrators responding to the crisis are representing the institution. Therefore, the individual mission of the university or college should be reflected in the decisions that are made. Institutions should train the members of crisis management teams on emergency procedures as well as the importance of the schools' missions and how they are reflected during a campus crisis.

I found little literature that addressed a student's death in a faith-based institution, and because I was particularly interested in the response of a faith-based institution to the death of a student, I decided to undertake such a study.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The methodology used for this research was interpretive case study. Interpretive research means the researcher seeks to understand the issue itself and, in turn, interprets and describes one's findings in order to create an understanding for the reader (Stake, 1995). According to Stake (1995), when conducting case studies, the researcher engages in an in-depth study in order to gain information, understand, and make meaning of the human experience from multiple realities. The researcher is flexible, perceptive, and patient when conducting interpretive research, and gains information through multiple sources including stories and testimonies from individuals. The researcher is also reflective and open to hearing other points of view (Stake, 1995). The researcher has to be cognizant of patterns and themes that emerge throughout the research itself.

This methodology was ideal for my study, as I had an intention to learn, understand, reflect, and describe how one faith-based institution responded to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student. I wanted to understand the organizational processes that support the response and whether the response reflected the nature of the individual institution.

Research Design and Its Rationale

This research was a single case study bounded by the institution itself. This study is considered an "instrumental case study" (Stake, 1995) because I focused on one topic and used this particular case to describe the issue itself. Stake's (1995) approach was followed in conducting the research. It was my intention to study the experiences of the staff and administration in responding to the death of an undergraduate student. I made

sure that the research was holistic and contextual. I focused on learning about the processes and experiences of the staff members who respond to the crisis, and discovering the meaning that people attached to that experience, as well as their perceptions and feelings.

Determining the Site of the Study

In deciding the site for this study, several faith-based institutions came to mind. I specifically chose a private, faith-based college located in the Midwest. This college is a 4-year, liberal arts, residential college with its roots in the Lutheran tradition. Their Web site indicated they welcome students of all faith traditions, and their published mission statement references the Christian gospel. The majority of their students live on campus in the residence halls for their entire undergraduate career. The convictions stated on their Web site explain that the college fosters the development of the whole person, which includes the spirit as well as the mind and the body.

Another reason I chose this site was because when my daughter was in elementary school, her teacher took a leave of absence due to the death of her child. When her teacher returned to the classroom, I talked with her regarding her daughter's death. Her daughter was a student at this specific college. She indicated to me that she would have never made it through the past 6 weeks without the help of her daughter's college. I was not the dean of students at the time and I was not in a role where I had been involved in the death of a college student on my own campus. I remember wondering at the time what this college could have possibly done to help this mom deal with the insurmountable grief of losing a child. Years later, when it came time for my own daughter to search for a college, we toured this campus. Upon touring the grounds,

we came upon a memorial that simply captivated me. This attractive structure contained a list of students who had died during their time at the college. It was both beautiful and overwhelming to me: I was moved as both a parent touring the campus and as a student affairs professional.

When I decided to study this college, I contacted the vice president for student life and the president of the college; their Institutional Review Board gave me permission to conduct this study. In addition, they gave me permission to use the name of the college. I chose, however, to keep it confidential and use a pseudonym instead. Thus, in this study the college will be referred to as St. Gregory.

Participant Selection

I solicited participants who have worked on campus and specifically responded to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student while the student was currently enrolled. The student may have died on campus or off campus and the participant had responded in some manner within the past 10 years. The participant's role may have been in direct response to the student or in response to the student's family, the classmates of the student, or the St. Gregory community in general. The person may have responded immediately or in the aftermath of the death.

In order to find the names of the staff members who have functioned in this role, the vice president for student life sent me a list of potential names that included staff from the following offices and departments: Campus Activities, Counseling Center, Dean of Students, Facilities and Grounds, Pastor's Office, President's Office, Marketing and Communications Department, Public Safety, Residence Life, and the Stewardship Office. He also gave me the name of an individual faculty member and two custodians who had

been involved with a student death. I then wrote an e-mail to each of these individuals explaining the purpose of the study, the criteria, and expectation for participation (see Appendix A).

I sent an e-mail to 19 individuals and within days heard back from 13 people indicating an interest in participating in the study. It was fortunate that each person represented a different functional area. I interviewed one person from each of the following offices: Campus Activities, Counseling Center, Marketing and Communications Department, Pastor's Office, President's Office, Public Safety, and the Stewardship Office. I interviewed three people from Facilities and Grounds, two people from the Dean of Students Office, and one person who worked in both Residence Life and the Dean of Students Office. With the exception of one staff member, the rest had all played a role in the response to the death of an undergraduate student. One staff member had not been involved in the college's official response but he was a fairly recent graduate who had a friend die at the college when he was a student on campus. He spoke from his perspective of being a student on campus and experiencing a death of a friend and classmate.

When I wrote to the potential participants, I explained that I had the permission of the Institutional Review Board at both institutions and also assured them of the confidentiality of their responses. I assured their confidentiality by giving each individual a pseudonym. I let them know that I would not be using the name of the college in my study; however, due to the uniqueness of their Memorial Chime Tower on campus, individuals may be able to identify the college. I let them know that although the administration at St. Gregory was supportive of the study, the administration would

not know who participated in the study or what information they shared. I did not ask information about individual students; however, it was only natural that student names were used by participants in some of their interviews. I did not use any of those names in my findings. The focus of the study was solely on the institutional response to a student's death.

Data Collection

The data collection included in-depth individual interviews with 13 participants along with a thorough review of relevant information on the Web site and my own observations when I visited the campus on four different dates. I also kept a journal of my thoughts, insights, and observations as I gathered my data.

Interviews. I began each interview by thoroughly explaining my topic and then asking the participants about their background at St. Gregory. After each individual signed the consent form, I turned on the digital recorder. Each participant shared either excitement or interest about my topic and seemed eager to share his or her experiences. The interviews were comfortable, and the conversations and questions flowed easily. I limited the number of questions because I did not want to infuse my bias with leading questions. I used the following questions as prompts:

- Tell me about your role in the response to a student death and how it fits into the campus response plan.
- Share your experience in responding to the death of a student at St. Gregory.

I asked follow up and probing questions as I deemed appropriate. My questions were different with each of the participants, as many had a unique or special story to share as they referenced their roles and part in the responses to student deaths. Many of

the participants were willing to talk about the topic and it took very little prompting on my part to keep the information flowing. At the end of the interview, I concluded by asking if the participants had anything else to say that has not been said. I recorded all of the interviews, which took between 45 to 60 minutes for each interview. I did not take any notes during the interview, as I thought it was important to be focused on listening. I did put my own thoughts into a journal at the end of each set of interviews.

Web site. In addition to the interviews, I also spent some time reading articles on the college Web site that were written about the students who had died. I wanted to find more information about the students mentioned by the study participants. The articles gave me some insights into the students themselves and how the college had experienced the loss of the lives of some incredible students.

Observations. During my four visits to campus, I had an opportunity to observe the campus culture. I ate my meals in the student dining areas and observed the students and staff around me. I observed people on the campus and interacted with students and staff during my visits to the student center.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and the data were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. I read and reviewed each interview several times and highlighted any information that I thought was relevant. I then cut the highlighted information into strips and put the strips in piles of similar topics. I then read through the information in the piles and some themes emerged during the process.

These themes were put onto a large sheet of paper with each theme at the top and I taped the strips of highlighted information under each theme. Although, the themes and

corresponding information were relevant, they did not convey the depth of the staff responses or the emotions that I had heard in my interviews.

During my data collection, I kept putting my own thoughts and reactions in a journal. When I was analyzing the information I realized I was not capturing the essence of my interviews; thus, I reviewed my own journal entries and listened to the individual interviews. My journal entries reminded me of the emotions that were present in the people's stories and how privileged I felt to be a part of such meaningful conversation regarding such a delicate topic. I knew I wanted to capture the meaning behind the stories as well as some of the thoughts and feelings that were shared with me.

I decided that the best way to demonstrate more emotion and depth would be to include some of the stories that I heard during the interviews. I read each transcribed interview again and focused on the stories that had meaning to the participants as well as to me. According to Stake (1995), "All researchers have great privilege and obligation: the privilege to pay attention to what they consider worthy of attention and the obligation to make conclusions drawn from those choices meaningful to colleagues and clients" (p. 49). I then wrote out each story that had significance. I placed the stories in different piles, and found that many of the stories overlapped, while other stories were unique. By arranging similar stories into one pile, I was now able to put pieces of stories together and make sense of them. As I reshuffled the piles of stories, common themes emerged. The individual stories and integrated stories portrayed the information in a more meaningful way. They also helped to reveal emotions that were present and the deeper meaning behind the college response itself. The stories, along with my own observations and journal entries, portrayed the in-depth care behind the college's response to a student

death. I thought the best way to convey the response of the college to a death of a student would be to share the stories that represented the people's meaning behind the college's response to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student.

Validity

Researcher's bias. My current role as a dean of students created a potential bias in this research, with both positive and negative implications. A positive aspect of this bias is that I have responded to the death of an undergraduate student on a university campus several times, thus my own experience provided me with some insights and helped me understand and empathize with the participants. However, from a negative perspective, my previous experiences could have limited my acceptance of new information from participants. In order to bracket my bias, I wrote memos throughout the research process. By keeping a journal and writing memos, I was able to write down my own thoughts and reflections about the process, which in turn assisted me in keeping my thoughts separate from the information that I was gathering. I was aware of my researcher bias from the moment I stepped foot on the campus, as I immediately made assumptions about the culture of the campus based on my own biases. For example, when walking by the student dining room with the vice president for student life, I commented to him about the number of backpacks that were left unattended outside the dining room. My bias was that leaving a backpack unattended was an unsafe practice; however, it was not an issue. Due to my personal experience, I made an assumption that was not accurate and I tried not to do this again, even if it was difficult at times.

Member checking. After I completed Chapter 4 with my findings, I sent the chapter to the participants in my study. I wanted to make sure all of my facts were

accurate and wanted to confirm that I had captured the essence of the information shared with me. I offered them the opportunity to respond to me through e-mail, or meet with me in person. I heard back from most of the participants and their responses indicated that, indeed, I had accurately portrayed their role in the responses to a death of a student. The participants also acknowledged that I had captured the essence of their individual and the institution's responses to the death of a student.

The e-mail correspondence I received from the former pastor summarized it the best. He wrote,

While I can't say that I enjoy re-living all those awful experiences, I do appreciate re-living my time in a community of care and compassion, and you enabled me to do that. I think you've "captured the essence." And what is that? Perhaps it is more a matter of simply living out the community character than working out an institutional plan. I'm not against plans. I'm all for them, but in grief especially, one seeks compassion and authenticity more than a completed check list. And I think you've provided a good look into the community's character. Thank you.

The vice president for student life who had been instrumental in responding to each of the student deaths also affirmed my findings and in addition found two minor errors in the facts; I have made those corrections.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe a private faith-based institutional response to the death of a student. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how the campus community and institution's administration responded to a student's death. I wanted not only to understand the procedures they follow, but also investigate the feelings, emotions, and actions of the staff involved in the response. I also wanted to explore the meaning that people attach to the experience itself. The research question was, What is the institutional response to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student at a private, faith-based college?

I gathered information from the individual interviews with the participants, the college's Web site, and my observations. I organized this information into three main categories. The first section is the process itself, which describes the site, the interview space, and the participants. The second section is a collection of portraits of some of the people I interviewed and their individual stories. The third section is a collection of stories—some are verbatim from individual interviews, and most are integrated stories that I compiled from my interviews and my own research.

The Process

The site. The college is located in a town, less than an hour from a major city in a rural setting, and is at the top of a hill. The college is in a bucolic setting nestled near 325 acres of wetlands and woodlands. It is one of two private colleges located in the town. I spent four days on campus over a span of 1 month. During this time, I had the

opportunity to interview the staff, observe the activities in the student center, informally interact with some students, and make some observations of the campus culture.

When I arrived on campus for my first set of interviews, it was early morning and I observed students walking leisurely from their residence halls to the student center and classroom buildings. The slower pace of the students surprised me, and I quickly realized that my “researcher bias” was already present. I had become accustomed to a fast-paced hustle on my own campus in the early morning hours and was taken by surprise. I asked a student for directions and she went out of her way to walk with me to my specific destination.

Once inside the student center, I asked another student for directions, and again she walked me directly to the information desk. The first two students I met were very friendly and welcoming. The student center was already busy that Friday morning as there was a group of people setting up tables to sell hand-made goods and another group of people selling flowers. I learned that the selling of flowers was a tradition on the campus. Over the lunch hour, when I walked by the students’ mailboxes, many were filled with flowers purchased that morning by their fellow students.

During the time between gathering my data and writing about my findings there was a tragic car accident that involved the death of three college students at a neighboring college. When reading about the tragedy in the newspaper, I learned that the students at St. Gregory had reached out to the neighboring college and sent flowers to the students who had just experienced this shocking loss. The tradition of buying flowers for their own classmates was extended to students outside of their campus community at a neighboring school.

The interview space. When I met the staff person who helped me with the interview room, she handed me a key and then walked me to the space assigned for the interviews. It was a brand new space, and she had gone out of her way to make sure it was ready for me. She was very gracious and I appreciated the extra time that she had put in to make sure the space was ready. Shortly into my first interview, a custodian knocked on the door to see if the room was ready and appropriately set for me. In my short time on campus, I had already felt very welcomed and sensed a culture of care amongst the community members.

The interview space itself was comfortable. In order to make the participants as relaxed as possible, the interviews were conducted on the campus in a private office in the student center. With the exception of the interviews with the president of the college and vice president for student life, I conducted my interviews in this newly created space. The room was specifically set up for me with two chairs, a small table, and a desk. Being a brand new office with which participants were not familiar, the space served as a nice conversation starter with each participant.

Interviews with the president and vice president of student life were scheduled for my later visits. I was honored that the president was willing to meet with me, and I wanted to make it as comfortable as possible for him. The vice president for student life's name came up in several interviews, and I was beginning to understand that he played a key role in the response to a death of a student. I anticipated that my interview would go longer with him, and wanted to make it as relaxed as possible by scheduling it in his office. I was glad that I did so, because, as I had anticipated, our interview was lengthy and at times emotional.

It seemed to me that the participants felt comfortable as they freely shared information about their individual roles in the response to the death of a student. They shared stories about staff members who cared deeply about the students, each other, and the college. I was on campus four times over the span of 1 month to conduct interviews, and was glad that I had limited my number of interviews each day because both the content and emotion of the interviews were draining.

The Participants

The participants consisted of staff members and administrators. Their years of service ranged from 3 years to 30 years, with seven of the staff members having been at St. Gregory's for over 20 years. Included is Table 1 with a brief description of the participants and pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.

Table 1

Profiles of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of service	Role at St. Gregory
Patricia	Female	23	Administrator
Daniel	Male	9	Staff
Sandra	Female	11	Administrator
Linda	Female	15	Staff
Paul	Male	25	Administrator
Brian	Male	30	Retired staff member
Scott	Male	6	Administrator
Randy	Male	25	Administrator
JoAnne	Female	28	Staff
John	Male	25	Staff
James	Male	3	Staff
Mark	Male	8	Administrator
Charles	Male	24	Administrator

The first person I interviewed was a woman I had met briefly at a professional conference. She has been at the school for 23 years and she was able to give me an overview of the college's response to the death of a student. She began by sharing the overall process, and it became immediately clear to me that she has been a pivotal staff person in the college's response to the death of a student. Her care and compassion as a professional came through in her responses to my interview questions. Her interview set the tone for the remaining interviews. I quickly learned that the college response to a student death was not about the process itself, but the people who responded. The college had an informal protocol in place, and each individual intuitively understood his or her responsibilities within that process. Staff members had been trained in emergency responses and had confidence in each other. Many members have been at the college for multiple years and had developed strong working relationships.

As the interviews progressed, participants shared information in response to my questions about the death of a student, but ultimately shared so much more about their own thoughts and feelings, and the meaning they attached to their experiences. At times, some of the participants were filled with emotions as they talked about a traumatic or touching experience of the death of a student, or recalled stories regarding their interactions with the student's family members. Sometimes, I got caught by their emotions and I could feel a lump in my throat or my eyes fill with tears. There were also several times I felt goose bumps in response to a story that was shared regarding a student death. I quickly learned that the participants, who had responded to my e-mail, were passionate about the college and felt deeply about their experiences in responding to the death of a student.

My contact at the college for my study was the vice president for student life. When he gave me a suggested list of people to contact for interviews, some made sense to me and some did not. I was surprised to see names of individuals who worked in the facilities area. Again, my biased expectations played a role because at my own institution the list of people would have been different. Some people were members of their overall crisis response team and/or responding to emergencies was part of their job responsibilities. So having these people's names on the list made sense to me. They were staff members in the Counseling Center, Communications Office, Dean of Students Office, Pastor's Office, President's Office, Public Safety, Residence Life Office, and the Stewardship Office. In addition, there were names of staff members from the Campus Activities and Facilities Departments. These were staff members who had been involved in the death of a student because of the circumstances on the particular day when a student died, their relationship with a student, or their own altruism. Whatever the reason, they each had played a role on campus in response to the death of a student, although it was certainly not a part of their job description.

When I specifically asked the vice president for student life about the people involved in responding to a student death and the protocol guiding their response, he responded:

Who we are as a community of faith, you know, and the role of the pastors and the roles of other people; it's just part of it and I can't put that on a protocol. It's just what is and it's forged because of—the relationships we have with those—the relationship I have with the pastor that's been built over a long period of time before this thing happens, before the bad thing happens, and so the faith piece

plays—it's a huge, huge role but again it comes back to knowing the team, getting the right people in the room, getting the right people around the table.

He also talked about his confidence in staff members who can walk in to a death scene and have the poise, authority, and composure to handle the situation with a group of upset students and/or a family who have just lost a child.

He continued,

The work isn't like, okay, we have a perfect checklist to go through. I mean if we've been successful in these and not just incidents like this but other incidents, it's because we have the right people in the place and they were in an environment where they understood hierarchy but it wasn't the most important thing in the room. The other part is just having a student affairs organization where anyone can step in. And I've more confidence in that than I have in anything in my life.

These statements became clearer when I completed the interviews and the analysis of the data. I came to understand the level of commitment from some of the participants, some of whom were trained to respond to campus emergencies and others who responded out of their own human kindness.

Portraits of People and Their Stories

Some of the participants had unique stories to share regarding their role in the response to the death of a student. For example, one participant shared how responding to the death of a student had a physical impact on her. She felt the heaviness in her head and chest as she was preparing to communicate with other campus members regarding the most recent death on campus. Another shared a compelling story regarding a person

who had no official role in responding to the death of a student, but who stayed beyond her custodial shift in a residence hall to be with the family of the student who died. Two staff members from the Facilities Department were instrumental in the creation of a permanent memorial on campus. They were involved at the initial conception stage, along with the building of the memorial itself, and the eventual maintenance and care of the structure. In addition, the president of the college and vice president for student life created a culture of compassion on campus and a community of people who take the time to recognize and acknowledge death.

Sandra, class dean. Sandra, who was in the role of class dean at the time of the most recent death at St. Gregory, knew she needed to find the college pastor immediately after she became aware of a student who died in the residence hall. When she was unable to reach him by phone, Sandra walked around campus trying to find him. She talked about the awkwardness of running into people and being unable to tell them what happened. As she reflected on this day, she realized that it was her first time dealing with the death of a student after becoming a parent herself. From her perspective as both a parent and a student affairs professional she described it in the following way:

You know that awful feeling in your chest, that it's a very physical thing, and when I am out there hunting and knowing I can't tell people why I am looking for the pastor, I need to find him now and I can't really stop and talk to you and make nice with you, and knowing somebody right now, it stays spinning in your head and spinning in your chest, and it was just this—I think you probably know the feeling, the awfulness that sort of sits there heavy and hot and you're thinking and putting yourself in the position of what it is like for that mother who does not

know yet, who is about, any minute now, and for that father and siblings. And so, I think the hardest part for me was that, or the part that had the most impact—that I can say there was a physical impact on me—I'm a mom now and there couldn't be anything more awful.

Although Sandra's job has since changed, her job description still had the task to respond to emergencies on campus. She understood the protocol and response procedures for a death of a student, and she was trained in emergency procedures. During the most recent death, she knew her role was one of communication. She fielded calls from parents who had heard there was something that had happened on campus. Although she could not share any specific information, she was able to assure them of their individual student's safety. She and her colleagues responded in a way that was professional, yet also indicative of their compassion. Sandra is a graduate of St. Gregory, who worked in student affairs at several other schools, but later returned to the school that she had once attended and cared so much about.

Linda, the custodian. It is not in everyone's job description to respond to emergencies. One administrator, John, was very proud as he shared with me the role that one of his employees took on following the immediate death of a student. He told me, "The custodian in that building waited past her shift to be with the family. That probably says as much as anything about the depth of care that there is for these kids." On the day of the most recent death, the student was found dead in her bed. The custodian made sure the room was appropriately cleaned so her roommate would not have to see the soiled sheets and the state of the room. She also washed the student's bedding so it was prepared for the family, just in case they wanted it. I had the opportunity to interview her

and she talked about being there again when the student's dad came to collect the student's belongings a few days after the death. According to Linda,

The dad had come a few days later and got the belongings and stuff out of her room, and yeah, we were there. It went fine . . . like I said, we don't know them well but, you know, you still care. You don't know quite what to say, but I guess there's not really anything right or wrong—just at a time like that—it was just comforting to be able to do what we could, I guess.

Linda talked about her pride of working in the residence halls, and in particular, the one she worked in. She commented that it is a more difficult building to work in because there is no elevator, but she stays there because of the atmosphere and the students.

Paul and John, facilities and grounds administrators. In addition to Linda, I interviewed two other staff members from the facilities staff; both are long-term employees. They played an instrumental role in developing a permanent memorial in honor of students who have died while attending St. Gregory. John, one of the staff members who had so proudly told me about Linda and her role in a recent death also shared his perception of the community, “It's a small community, and because I have been here twenty-five years, I feel like I've lived in this community and just know these people as family. So retirements, deaths, are similar to a family loss.”

His colleague Paul had similar feelings about the St. Gregory community and described a time on campus when three students died in a car accident on their way to do service for spring break. Paul referenced how difficult this was for the entire campus. Just a few months prior to this event, another student had died. He was a transfer student and was new to campus. The student was not well known to many other students at the

time of his death, but Paul knew him well because he was a friend of his son. The following February, almost a year later, another student died in a car accident. The death of five students within a 16-month timeframe was a lot to handle for this tight-knit community. Paul wanted to make sure that every student who died got the same kind of attention and care. He characterized the death of his son's friend in the following manner:

I'd say most kids here didn't even know him. So, that just happened and sort of almost just passed by. I just really—in addition to the other people that had passed away either before graduation or after, whatever, and we would do this memorial kind of bench and things like that all over the place. And those things are fine, but I'm maybe altruistic in some ways, I'd rather see everybody get the same sort of attention, the same sort of care, that kind of thing. But this kid, [name], really triggered in me that we need to think of a better way to do this so everyone is treated the same.

Paul was not alone in his thinking, and he and John, along with other colleagues, eventually tackled the project of developing the Memorial Chime Tower that now is strategically placed in the center of campus. Paul was instrumental in taking this project from a drawing on a napkin, to the building and dedication of the memorial itself. In reflecting on this project, Paul recalled,

Yeah, it's been . . . all told, I think it's one of the coolest parts of my time here. You know, letting this thing evolve and getting accepted in a good way. My one kid, who almost might have been bypassed in the whole thing, it was a big deal.

And his friends and my sons and all that, I think it just resonated with a whole lot of people—you know, themselves—who were never really in the “in” crowd.

These staff members, Sandra, Linda, John, and Paul shared individual stories that were a reflection of the culture at St. Gregory, a community that is influenced by its leaders, its president, and a community where staff members felt connected to the students.

Mark, college president. As the leader of a college or university, the president often influences the culture of the college. At St. Gregory, the president of the college is an active and visible member of the community. He has played an instrumental role in creating a collaborative environment, where staff and faculty work closely together on a daily basis and during times of crisis. He is a proud alumnus of the college who returned after serving in roles as a faculty member and administrator at other institutions. He had been at a large public comprehensive university and three liberal arts colleges, only one of which was faith based. I had an opportunity to interview the president and quickly came to understand his role as it related to death on campus.

When I arrived for the interview, he greeted me in his outer office area and described the history of several pieces of furniture and their relevance to the college. As an alumnus, he clearly had a lot of school pride, and his pleasant demeanor and personality quickly put me at ease. As the interview began, he told me that he was unsure how much help he would be, since he had only been the president of the college for the death of one student. At that point, I had already completed 11 interviews, and his name came up several times, so I knew that his presence and leadership had not only been relevant, but also had been admired and appreciated by the staff.

As the leader of the St. Gregory community, the president was seen as the comforter of the community. It is a community that recognizes death, a community where people take time to show up and express sympathy. The college pastor's office sent out e-mails if there was a death of a relative of any community member, whether the sibling of a faculty member or the spouse of a staff member. The president wrote handwritten notes to anyone in the community who had experienced the death of a significant person in his or her life.

At the time of our interview, the president had spent a significant amount of time consoling the campus community because there had been several notable deaths of community members that fall. He directed me to their Web site where they had recorded the recent service of a beloved campus pastor on their site.

As the president was speaking about his role in responding to the death of a resident student on campus, he vividly remembered the details of the day. He had been meeting with some donors when he heard the news. He quickly excused himself and went immediately to the residence hall where the student had lived. He knew he had no obvious role, but he also knew it was important for him to be there. When he arrived at the scene, he found several distraught students and immediately asked the pastor what he should do. He was directed towards the student's roommate and was told he could help by comforting her. I told him that I thought that was likely very meaningful for the student. He agreed and shared what he thought was significant about it:

When you're the college president, one of the things you realize is that every time you go someplace and do something people notice and they make inferences based on what you've done, even though there may not have been any intended

meaning. So, I think when other students there see the president show up they say, “Well this thing about the whole college caring for you, I guess, is really true: there’s the president.” And, I think when you show up and ask for help from the college pastor instead of just saying, “Hey I’m in charge now,” I think that models something good.

I had heard this same sentiment from two other staff members, as they had both recalled the events of the most recent student death on campus. Both participants had mentioned how they appreciated the president’s role as a provider of comfort. He let the staff members accomplish the work they had each been trained to do, and he took on the role of comforting some of the students and, in particular, the roommate of the individual who had just died.

I wondered if the president’s role as comforter of the community was shaped by the faith of the college. Because he had been in administrative roles at a variety of institutions, I was curious about his role at his current faith-based college. When I asked him whether he thought the response to the death of a student was different at a faith-based institution he responded:

Just to be perfectly blunt about it, there is a humongous difference between the way you respond to something like the death of a student at a faith-based college. You have an available set of known and approved rituals for expressing grief, you have a bunch of people accustomed to pastoral care, and if you’re not a Lutheran or not even a Christian, or not even a person who believes in any God at [college name] you still have the great big church in the middle there, and daily chapel and the pastors being visibly present in the life of the place. So you’re accustomed to

pastoral care. You have a bunch of people who, because they willingly chose to either study or work at a place that has the word *saint* in its name, a readiness to experience loss in the environment of a larger, overarching set of beliefs, customs, and rituals. So, I just think you have so many resources in a faith-based institution to address grief and loss and shock and so forth than you do in other kinds of places.

His response to my question confirmed the examples from other participants regarding the role of faith and spirituality in the response to a student death. The president's role as the consoler of the community and the leader of the college contributed to the response of the college to the death of a student. In addition to the leadership role of the president, the vice president for student life also set the tone for the college's response.

Randy, vice president for student life. The current vice president for student life had been in the role of dean of students during several deaths of students on campus. He played an instrumental role in the organization of the college response and continued communication with the families for many years beyond their student's death. He was also instrumental in the creation and the building of the permanent memorial. His experiences in responding to the death of students not only impacted him personally, but changed his career and his life. Randy talked about his professional career in two parts: his career before the accident that killed the three students, and his career after the accident. One of the most significant events for him was the death of three students who died in a car accident on spring break. They were on their way to participate in a service project in New Orleans when they were hit by a drunk driver. Randy, who was the interim dean of students at the time, along with the college pastor, spent the week flying

across the country to the students' hometowns for their funerals, along with visiting the two surviving students in a hospital in another state.

Randy was in an interim role, because there was a lot of transition going on at the college at that time. After he and the former pastor attended the funerals of the three students in their hometowns, they returned to campus. When spring break concluded and everyone else returned to campus, the campus community was shocked and devastated. The three sophomores were well known on campus as very involved students.

For Randy and his staff it was time to deal with the students, staff, and faculty returning from break and hearing the news. He was exhausted; along with many colleagues, he responded to the friends of the students, the memorial service, the families, and everything involved when dealing with the death of a student. Everything was magnified times 3. As he recalled the time of events, he shared how he and his staff were consumed with the tragedies on hand:

I mean, everybody's got a hand in this, it was just chaos and it was 24/7, literally just all this stuff. And again, these are wonderful people, people are doing the job. [Name] is doing the job, everybody is just doing awesome stuff attending to the families. And there was some craziness that was beyond belief in this whole thing and there was the memorial service and we had to get through that I'll never forget.

A memorial service was held and there were more than 1400 students, staff, and faculty in attendance. The community grieved together, and as one staff member recalled, "The whole place sort of fell apart," appropriately so under the circumstances.

During this very difficult time, Randy was also dealing with a challenging student situation and needed to make a decision about removing the student from school. This demanding decision added to the emotions and exhaustion of the week. During this challenging week, the former president called him into his office and offered him the position of dean of students. It was a time filled with emotions and exhaustion in a long and difficult week, and he was not even sure he wanted the job. The president told him he had seen everything he needed to see; Randy handled everything so well and the president wanted him in that role permanently. After some initial hesitation, he accepted the position, and was no longer the interim dean of students. Now, upon reflection, Randy talked about how that very difficult time in his job impacted both his career and his personal life. He was emotional as he recalled the events of the three students who died and the two who were injured in the horrendous automobile accident. He indicated he has felt some guilt about how his life and the eventual good that has come out of it for him professionally and personally. The way he had handled the death of the students was acknowledged by the president, and that impacted his career.

As a result of the student deaths, he was also instrumental in the creation of a permanent memorial on campus. That project, which is explained in depth later in this chapter, actually changed his life. Randy participated in the design and building of the Memorial Chime Tower. He marked this experience as the biggest highlight of his career. He talked about how his experience building the Memorial Chime Tower changed his life and the life of his son. After that experience, he became a woodworker in his spare time and since then has built wooden furniture and boats. He even made the furniture in his office. He passed this passion on to his son who took on the same craft.

It impacted both his career and his life. He finished his story with the statement, “I mark time before and after what happened with that. So when I talk about how it changes people, it changes people.” Randy, along with other staff members who have responded to the death of a student, acknowledged how responding to the death of students impacted them personally as well as professionally.

The Stories

There are many stories that the participants shared with me regarding their own experiences in responding to the death of a student. Some narratives that follow are recounted the way I heard them from an individual, such as Brian, the former pastor telling the story of the importance of friends grieving for other friends. Additionally, JoAnne from the Stewardship Office explained how the endowed scholarships that are established by the college in the name of the deceased student have kept the students’ families connected with the college. Many of the families returned to campus to meet their child’s scholarship recipients, which led JoAnne to tell the story of three young sisters who returned to campus each year to honor a sister, who died before they ever met her, and her death changed their lives forever.

However, some stories were repeatedly told by participants with some nuances, so it made sense to me to compile them in more complete versions. These combined stories captured several different efforts put forth by the staff in response to a student death. Specifically, the stories recounted the time and effort staff members spent in reaching out to every student impacted by the death of a fellow student, along with intentional opportunities for students to pray and grieve together following the death of a classmate. In addition, participants recalled traditions of remembering deceased students at holidays,

as well as commencement time. By far, the most notable collection of stories I heard was about the designing and building of the Memorial Chime Tower as a permanent and visual reminder for all students who have died while at St. Gregory. Pieces of this story were repeated several times, and I really did not fully comprehend the magnitude and meaning of the project until I was able to combine all of the stories from the participants who had played some role in this endeavor. The majority of this chapter focuses on the story of the Memorial Chime Tower. Finally, the last set of stories captured the sentiments I heard from different participants about efforts made by the college in moving on after the death of a student.

Reaching out to all students impacted by the student death. Several staff members assumed the role of reaching out to all students who may have been impacted by the death of a fellow student. Communicating this information in person was significant for these professionals. The staff members wanted to make sure that the students were officially notified about a death of a peer, and also wanted to have resources and venues to share their grief. The former college pastor, who was also very involved with both the notification and support of students during a death, referenced the challenges of working with the traditional-aged 18- to 22-year-olds when it comes to death and why he thought personal communication and support was so important. His office sent out the official notification of a student death, and he indicated,

I guess the other thing I was going to say is that most 18- to 22-year-olds have never been to a funeral, so the thing that's different about student grief is that they don't have any experience surviving it, they don't know how they are going to survive this death that they have been through. They truly don't have the

experience of surviving that kind of grief, many of them still have living grandparents—they just haven't been there before. That's the one uniqueness of probably about doing this on a campus as compared to say a normal congregation or community where most of the people have been to funerals before and are doing this again. On a college campus, most of them have not been there before. This is a first time.

Similarly to the former pastor, the director of the counseling center shared thoughts about personal communication and paid attention to all students who were impacted by the death of a classmate. He referenced a 1st-year student who died in a car accident in the wee hours of the morning. During those early hours, the counselors and other staff members entered the residence halls where the student lived, waited for students to wake up, and then told them that their friend and classmate had died. Reaching out to all impacted students was a shared value for those involved in responding to a student death.

In the most recent death, Patricia, a residence life administrator, worked tirelessly to find out all the information that was available about the student. She checked the deceased student's initial college application to see if the person had any relatives or family members at the college. Once the family was notified, she wanted to make sure that the friends and classmates were all notified as well. She described,

We asked the roommates and friends—who is she dating? Who did she work with? And we started sending our area coordinator staff and RAs [resident assistants] to start going and finding those students. So, it's trying to get as much

information so we haven't forgotten somebody, and ultimately we always do because you can't know who all is touched by this.

Patricia wanted to make sure her staff notified other students, who may have not known the student. She continued,

But also, in a small community, you never know how a death is going to impact somebody else, maybe they lost a sibling in a car accident and they didn't know this student at all, but it just brings it back. And so, you get to see—we talk to our staff a lot about paying attention to see who is really suddenly impacted, who is withdrawing, who has been struggling. And I think that's really important—we kind of wear all of our successes together, but also some of our sadness together. It's trying to pay attention to some of that, too.

Patricia and her colleagues understood the importance of reaching out to students individually. Responding to all students was a collaborative effort in order to have generated in-person communication, as well as sharing resources with students.

While several participants acknowledged the importance of communicating in person, they also acknowledged the challenges of social media. In the most recent death, the staff members were able to notify many students about the death in person; however, with the continued increase in the use of social media and texting, there was an awareness of how texting and social media would impact the efforts for personal communication. I then asked the former pastor, who had recently retired, if there was anything else of significance he wanted to share with me. He mentioned how he had been thinking about how social media would impact the communication regarding the death of a student. Brian said,

One of the things that I've wondered about in my last couple of years at [name] and even in retirement, is how might social media affect all of this. I still think it's important for students to hear as early as possible from the institution, not just from each other, what's happened. [In] social media, they're going to hear very quickly from each other what happened, but I don't think that makes it less important for some official word from the institution. I think it might make it more important.

Patricia from residence life also indicated a concern about the use of social media and how important it was for the college to control the message and relay accurate information regarding the student death. She indicated that if the institution did use social media to contact the students, the message was generic and indicated they needed to communicate important information to them, but that the institution waited to share the specific information in person.

Time and place to grieve. In addition to communicating with the students, the staff members provided opportunities for the students to grieve together and pray together. Because it is a faith-based school, the chapel quickly became a focal gathering place for students to grieve. Patricia specified,

One of the wonderful benefits is that we never have to hesitate to talk about God and have a church and go pray and send people to the chapel. You know, even when something bad happens in the world—the World Trade Center and 9–11, we go to our chapel. That's where the president addressed us, that's where people wait to hear news about loved ones. So, there is a significant neat thing about never hesitating to do that.

Patricia, along with her colleagues, had involved students in the planning of a memorial service as a tangible way for the students to deal with their grief. The former pastor, Brian, also talked about including the friends in the service:

Almost every student has an assortment of friends where not every friend knows every other friend. I mean you have friends in your major and different friends on your floor and still friends that sing in your choir, or whatever. But they kind of find each other and so . . . I mean, usually they know which of the friends should be most involved, which ones should speak, which ones should make the decisions about what we are going to read, what we we're going to sing.

The opportunity to grieve with friends was very important to one of the young staff participants, James, who was still a student when his friend died. He indicated that it was a very shocking moment when he found out his friend had died. He said he went to the chapel that evening for a vigil, and although he considers himself a casually religious person, he recalled how having staff members available and the church as a gathering place mattered to him. He told me, "That evening they held a vigil in the chapel. Everyone was invited; it was very—just very easy-going, anybody could say whatever they wanted to. Professors were there, [name] was there."

He continued,

The chapel, the music in the chapel, go hand-in-hand and offer a really very healing, and almost medicinal purpose. A death is a death, and no matter if you're Catholic, or if you're Lutheran, you feel very comfortable, particularly in the [name] Chapel here. You know, you just see all your friends from different

stripes coming together; at least for me this is the reason this place exists on campus.

Responding to individual students and creating space for students to grieve with each other had been a critical first response to students on campus. Both the director of the counseling center and the former pastor also acknowledged the value of providing space and time for students to grieve, pray, and comfort each other. Having a memorial service in the chapel was a consistent practice for each student who died, regardless of their religious backgrounds. The former pastor specifically shared a time when they had a very lovely and meaningful ceremony in the chapel for a Buddhist student, just as they had done for everyone else.

Grieving for a friend. Brian the former pastor, who had spent a significant amount of his career working with college students, talked about the profound grief that students experienced with the death of a friend. He talked about how policies are in place for family members who experienced this loss, but not for friends. He gave examples of airlines providing reduced tickets for someone attending a family funeral or workplace policies allowing family members to take off work for a funeral, but, in general, there was not any type of policy in place for friends.

Brian also spoke about how students provided comfort for each other in the time of grief, “I think it’s not fair to pretend that students are not very good at doing that for each other. Students are very good at doing that for each other.” He also talked about his role when he was the pastor and how he counseled students:

So, of course I was involved in it, especially in the case of the three students that were all killed in the same accident. That was shocking to a lot of people and I

spent hours and hours and hours for a year or two after that with many students. But not because they didn't have anybody else. They did have each other as well. When thinking about this, I'd guess I'd say a couple of things: one is that [name] students taught me the significance, the seriousness of friend grief, that at the time of death, it's not just family that have real grief, the grief of friends is every bit as real as the grief of family members. I never had to carry that burden of grief counseling alone, the whole community did grief counseling, not just me.

Brian and the other staff members had made it a priority to reach out to individual students and provide resources for students who were grieving. In addition to the immediate response, the staff members at St. Gregory had made several long-term commitments to remember every student who died while being a student at St. Gregory.

Never Forgotten

The college established several traditions to remember students who have died. At Christmas time, immediately following the student's death, the vice president for student life sent a Christmas ornament to the family. He acknowledged that this was a difficult time of the year and wanted to let them know their child was being remembered during this holy season. Then again, students were remembered during the commencement exercises the year when the student would have graduated. Other traditions were long lasting and included the development of endowed scholarships and invitations for the family to return to campus for special events. Perhaps the most impressive gesture at St. Gregory was the creation of a permanent, visible reminder of every student who died in a memorial located in the middle of the campus.

Placing a rose on an empty chair. It has become a custom for family members to return to campus for the commencement exercises when their child would have graduated. Families are invited to campus where their child was acknowledged at the ceremony. Two participants told stories about graduation and how touched they were by the visible traditions during the ceremonies. JoAnne from the Stewardship Office talked about one particular year when two families returned to campus for what would have been their sons' commencement ceremony. Both their sons were the same age and both died the same year, although in separate incidents. The college staff members brought the two families to campus for a private brunch before graduation, and the families obviously knew that what they had in common was the loss of their sons. It had become a tradition at St. Gregory to have an open chair at graduation for a student who died and to leave a rose on the chair. JoAnne showed the two families their sons' chairs and, as she remembered the story now years later, it was still hard for her to tell it without tearing up. She recalled,

And then it was time to go down onto the field for commencement and I saw them walking down with their families and I said, "I want to show you where your sons' chairs are." And both fathers and mothers fell into each other's arms and they were sobbing and I'm bawling—I mean it was again, it was just another touch.

Also, James, who is an alumnus of the college and a current staff member, recalled his recent graduation:

You know, one of the cool things was in our graduation . . . in the commencement booklet her name is there in memoriam. She still received a memorial

baccalaureate degree because the college—you know, one of the things we believe here, when you come in 2006, you leave in 2010. It's a 4-year degree for a reason, and unless there are really extenuating circumstances we have really high graduation rates, and when we accept a class we understand that this is the year that the class will be leaving. And so they maintained that for her.

James continued with a story about an illumination ceremony that took place the Saturday before graduation. Each graduate assembled in the quad to light a small lantern with their name on it. The first lantern they lit that year was for James's friend who had died. Although she had died her sophomore year, they made sure she was remembered in the ceremony by lighting her light. She too was remembered at commencement as part of the class, from the lighting of the lantern, name in the graduation booklet, and the rose on the empty chair. Figure 1 is a picture of a lit lantern traditionally used in the graduation ceremony. Figure 2 is an example of the lanterns leading to the Memorial Chime Tower at graduation time.



Figure 1. Lighting of the lantern. Copyright 2009 by St. Gregory's College. Reprinted with permission.

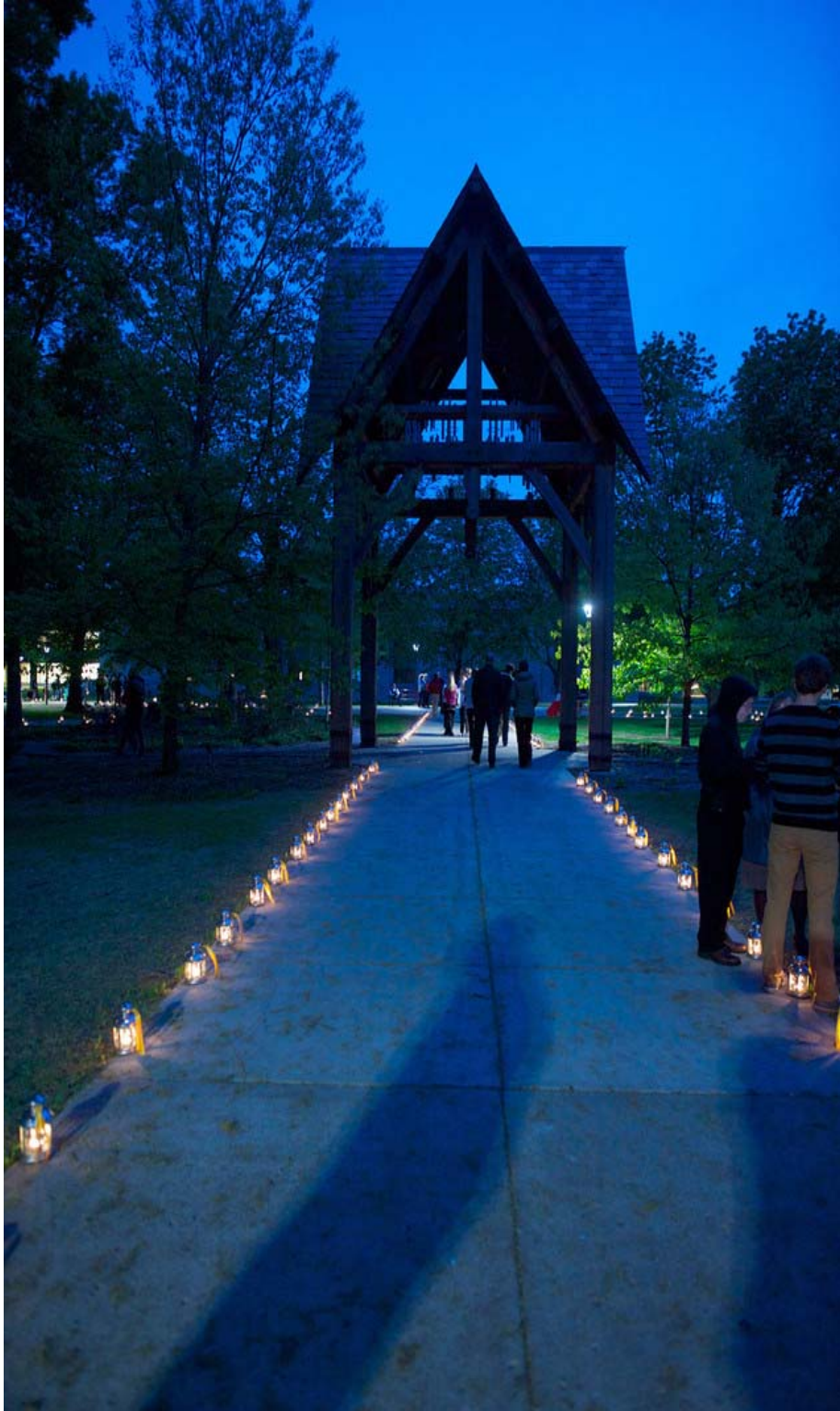


Figure 2. Illumination ceremony 2013. Copyright 2013 by St. Gregory's College.

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Magic happens. Another tradition was the establishment of an endowed scholarship in the name of the student who died. The staff in the Stewardship Office worked closely with the family to determine the criteria for the recipients. Although some families have added money to the scholarship, it certainly is not an expectation. This is one way that family members are assured that their child is remembered on an annual basis. Some families stayed involved in the choosing of the recipients and attended a reception each year honoring their child and the student recipient. In addition, the student recipients wrote a note to the family and told them a little bit about themselves. The families really appreciated and enjoyed meeting and communicating with their student scholarship recipient. According to JoAnne in the Stewardship Office, “We invite the recipients and we have a luncheon and, of course, bringing the donors and the students’ together, magic happens”.

Honoring the sister they never met. One family attended the scholarship reception each year since their daughter died and stayed in contact with staff members at the college. Their only child had cancer and died while studying at St. Gregory. Her dying wish was that her parents would go to Russia and adopt a child after she died. Her parents honored her wish and went to Russia where they met two young girls in an orphanage. The girls were sisters and did not want to separate from each other, so the parents came home with both girls. After some time back in the United States, the two young girls missed their good friend from the orphanage. The family went back to Russia and adopted her too. The family returned to the college each year with their three daughters so they could keep them connected to the memory of their older sister, whom they never met. Their lives were changed by their sister’s final wish.

In addition, other family members who have had a child die often return to campus for concerts or events that their child would have been a part of and/or had meaning for their child. The college makes sure that the family has a special place to sit and that someone is there to greet them.

Memorial Chime Tower

The most captivating story I heard many times from the participants was about the eventual response to a difficult time in which five students had died in a span of 16 months. This major loss of life resulted in the eventual planning and building of a permanent memorial for all students who had died during their time as a student at St. Gregory. As the former pastor shared the story with me, he indicated that “five seemed like too many and to just sort of absorb five and move on wasn’t working.” The staff members knew it was time to create a memorial to remember all students who had died while attending St. Gregory.

The design and building of the Memorial Chime Tower is a story about how staff and faculty came together to create something distinctive that will remain on the campus indefinitely, and will be a visual reminder of the students who died while attending St. Gregory. As the project unfolded, there were many special moments and events that came together to make it very meaningful for the people that participated in it. As Randy recalled,

Just one story after another in this whole thing—I am not trying to romanticize it Karen, but I’ve never been around something that was quite like this. It came together—the best word I can come up with is *organically* and *collaboratively*.

This project, which started out as a drawing on a napkin, was now a symbol of the community at the St. Gregory campus. It reflected their culture and how their campus responded to students who had died.

A drawing on a napkin. As previously mentioned, Paul from the Facilities Department, along with the former pastor, and the current vice-president for student life, began to brainstorm what type of memorial they would like to have. They had discussed this concept before this difficult time (death of five students in 16 months), but it had not yet come to fruition. They knew the time was right to create some type of permanent memorial. The initial concept was to create a type of bell tower. Paul drew a rudimentary drawing on a napkin of what they had envisioned. That initial drawing was transferred eventually to a white board in the Facilities Office. As the idea was further developed, they determined that they wanted to have a Norwegian influence on the structure that would capture some of the history of their institution.

Several things happened that contributed to the final design of the structure. The vice president for student life saw a sculpture in a small town in a neighboring state that had chime bundles on it. The sculpture was located in a memorial site in honor of Vietnam veterans from that state. The bundles of chimes listed names of individual men and women who had sacrificed their lives in the Vietnam War. The description of the memorial stated that “the names were never meant to be read individually . . . but to be voiced in sound” when the wind blows (<http://www.thehighground.org>.) While visiting the monument and listening to the soft music from the chimes, the vice president knew this was something he wanted incorporated into the memorial. The small group that worked on this project now included the wife of the former president. When he shared

this idea with the group, the president's wife had just been to a chime store in town and had seen a set of beautiful chimes with a captivating sound. They bought a bundle of those chimes to see if this might be a possibility.

Beautiful savior. Next, they needed to find a large set of chimes. They contacted the person who had started the company where they found the initial chimes and asked him about the biggest set of chimes he ever made. He stated that the biggest set of chimes he had were tuned to the song "Beautiful Savior." That song just happened to be the signature song of the St. Gregory choir. They instantly knew this was meant to be. According to Randy, "This was one of those beautiful, weird, unexplainable things that came together to make this project magical."

Now that they had made the decision to include the chimes in the memorial, they still needed to elaborate the structure beyond the drawing on the white board. Paul came upon a print on campus in an art gallery that was created by a professor at St. Gregory, who taught drawing and printmaking classes. The print was a timber-frame tower structure. Since he knew that timber framing was reflective of many different cultures and had roots in Asia and Europe, he instinctively knew this was the direction they should consider. The print was actually quite similar to the original drawing on the napkin. The next step in the drawing was an iteration that eventually evolved into a wooden, timber-frame, stand-alone structure.

Building the memorial, a labor of love. The next step was the building of the memorial. Their first reaction was to have someone make it for them; however, Brian was familiar with a folk school who taught timber framing. They contacted the school and they agreed to teach a group of volunteer faculty and staff how to build what would

soon become the Memorial Chime Tower. Little did they know how this team-building project for the staff and faculty would impact their lives and relationships for many years. It was also good timing that the family of a faculty member who had recently died donated a financial gift with the request that they use it for faculty and staff to collaborate, and also incorporate new people into the fold. The grant money was used for this project, and veteran faculty and staff, along with newer faculty and staff, all went to the folk school to learn timber framing. Several participants referenced the experience at the folk school as a highlight of their career. The staff and faculty worked together for 10 days straight and ate all of their meals together. As one staff member recalled his experience he estimated that they received about an hour's worth of instructions and then were given a bunch of tools that many of them had never used before. This experience of being together for 10 days, and learning a skill that not many of them knew, brought them closer together and forged many strong relationships. They developed relationships with colleagues that they may have never gotten to know if it had not been for this experience. Many of the staff and faculty members who participated in the building project were and still are currently viewed as integral and outstanding members of the St. Gregory community. The relationships they developed with each other have lasted for years beyond those 10 days. One participant remarked, "Honest to goodness, it's the most important thing I've ever done here."

In addition to the staff and faculty, one of the parents of a student who had recently died spent a day working on the chime tower. It was an opportunity for him to be a part of a project that would eventually bear a chime with his daughter's name.

Every student is remembered. Also while the structure was being built, work was being done behind the scenes, in preparation for the Memorial Chime Tower. One of the participants spent countless hours researching the names of every student who had died while attending St. Gregory from the beginning of its origins. She worked with the archivist and Alumni Office to make sure they collected every name and did not leave anyone out for any reason. One sister of an alumnus, who had died many years ago, called when she heard about the project; she said that she hoped her sibling would be included even though he died as a result of a car accident and he had been drinking. The response was that they were including all students no matter what the cause of death. Any student who had died while attending St. Gregory would have their own chime with the date of their death engraved on it.

Students' voices sounded in chimes. When the Memorial Chime Tower was completed, it was time to bring the tower home to campus and dedicate it. The entire project, from conception to completion, took about 18 months. In the months preceding the building of the Memorial Chime Tower, the college had planned a dedication of the site itself where the tower would reside. The families of the three students who had died in the car accident on spring break were in attendance at the dedication of the site. The college had planned the timing in conjunction with commencement so they could be there for the dedication of the site and for the ceremony when their children would have graduated. Following the dedication, a parent of one of the students who had died offered the vice president for student life a gift of their daughter's cremains, and asked that they place it somewhere special on the campus. This was an emotional decision for Randy as he recalled this student who had a special relationship with his daughter. After

much anguish and discernment, he had the small tube of cremains built into the woodwork of the chime tower. It seemed to be the most fitting place.

The actual assembly and dedication of the Memorial Chime Tower itself took place at the end of the following summer, right before the beginning of a new school year. The staff and faculty who were involved in building it, along with the staff from the timber school, were involved in assembling the structure. The structure itself was quite large and unlike any other building on campus. Figure 3 depicts a picture of the Memorial Chime Tower being assembled on the campus.



Figure 3. Assembly of the Memorial Chime Tower, 2003. Copyright 2003 by St. Gregory's College. Reprinted with permission.

Family members of students who had died along with many members of the St. Gregory community came to the dedication. The day of the dedication was a quiet and calm day. The former student's father who had spent a day with the staff and faculty working on the timbers read a poem he had written for his daughter. The dedication was peaceful and meaningful. Several staff members recalled how the breeze on this calm day would gently ring the chimes when a prayer was said for each student. One of the staff members who was very involved in the creation and building of the Memorial Chime Tower recalled,

The day we dedicated it, and it's happened a few times, other times as well, the day we dedicated it we had some of the three sets of chimes in the chapel for the ceremony, took those out to the tower and then raised them and hung them in place during the dedication. It was a relatively calm day, but every time a prayer was said for these students, there was just enough breeze to ring the chimes gently. You know, make of it what you will. (John)

This would not be the last time they would have this sensation at the Memorial Chime Tower. Figure 4 shows the chimes that are dedicated to the individual students.



Figure 4. The chimes dedicated to individual students, 2012. Copyright 2012 by St. Gregory's College. Reprinted with permission.

Ring out, Joshua. When the Memorial Chime Tower was completed, they purchased more chimes for future students who may die during their time at the college. These unnamed chimes hang from a wooden structure that one of the carpenters built. When a student dies, his or her name is added to the chime and the chime is hung in the chapel for everyone to see until the memorial service. Figure 4 shows a picture of the individual chimes. At the end of the memorial service, the chime is hung in the tower.

One participant recalled one of the first times they hung a chime in the memorial tower after it had been dedicated. Joshua (pseudonym for student) was missing and presumed dead as a result of an accident during some emergency training he was involved in for a campus class. The family came to campus for a memorial service and following the memorial service they raised the chime with the student's name on it.

According to JoAnne,

His grandpa, [name], was a pastor, an older pastor. So anyway, the family decided to have a memorial service on campus. Joshua hadn't been found yet so I remember sitting next to [name] our music conductor, and cuddling up to him. I was so cold. So it was a memorial service for the students, faculty, and staff and Joshua's family was there, and after the service was over we went out—you know, it's dark and it's cold, a December night. We walked out to the chime tower and Randy had arranged for a lift and he had the chime with Joshua's name on it.

They hung Joshua's chime and it was cold and it was still. We had a prayer, and then all of a sudden this gust of wind came through and the chimes rang. I get goose bumps to this day. And Josh's grandpa, Pastor [name], just out in this big

booming pastor voice, “Ring out, Joshua, ring out.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the place.



Figure 5. Memorial Chime Tower in winter, 2010. Copyright 2010 by St. Gregory’s College. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 5 shows an example of the Memorial Chime Tower in the winter months. Even as JoAnne recalled this story, she had the shivers. She understood the significance of the Memorial Chime Tower for this family and for other families. The tower was not

only an opportunity for closure for families, but was also a way to stay connected to the college.

Keeping families connected to their loved ones and the college. The Memorial Chime Tower has become a connection for many family members. Jo Anne recalled a time when the father of an international student who had died returned to campus from overseas to gather his son's belongings. The college staff had prepared a luncheon for him and several of his son's friends. The vice president for student life then arranged for a scissors lift so the father could be raised in the air to hang the chime himself. It was his opportunity to be a part of remembering his son on the St. Gregory campus.

Other family members who lost a child during his or her time at St. Gregory also had a connection to the chime tower and it kept them connected to the campus. If a family member stops by campus on a whim, the staff will take out the scissors lift so the family member can be raised high enough to see their child's chime hanging in the tower.

One participant shared a story about a parent of a student who died, who frequently checked the weather in the city where St. Gregory is located. If it is windy she will call the staff member and ask him to stand out by the chime tower with his cell phone and let her listen to the chimes. She finds comfort and peace in the chimes. It has become a meaningful connection to the campus.

A place of peace and closure. During the creation of the Memorial Chime Tower, there were conversations and some questions about the decision to create a memorial for students who had died. Some wondered if they really wanted a reminder of death, especially when it was going to be placed in a central location where many people walked every day. The former pastor indicated, "It has been a source of comfort rather

than distress.” His view was not unique; one participant shared a story about a time when a group of students camped out overnight under the memorial tower in honor of the birthday of their friend who had died. Also, students had been seen writing a note or leaving a prayer there for someone they knew. When I mentioned to one participant that I was surprised at the soft melody coming from the chimes, he responded, “So it doesn’t take much to draw people in and it’s simple as what you shared—you spend some time under there and it’s very melodic and it’s not clanging by any means.” Participants referenced it as a place of closure for family members and a place where students go to pray. Figure 6 shows the Memorial Chime Tower in its peaceful setting.



Figure 6. Memorial Chime Tower as a place of peace, 2011. Copyright 2011 by St. Gregory's College. Reprinted with permission.

One staff member, who is a former student, recalled it as being an important part of his daily routine:

I get to walk out the door, I get to walk underneath that Memorial Chime Tower if it's a nice day. It's nice and it is a fun walk—that's a cool thing about working on a college campus is you have these interesting walks you can go on. So, every day I go underneath it. I don't really know what to think. I'm really lucky I'm one of the only—there's three or four of us young alums that currently work here, so I get to walk underneath it and you sort of feel the weight of the history.

The Memorial Chime Tower is located in a central place where students pass by on a regular basis; on graduation day, students walked by the memorial on their way to the commencement exercises. That was an intentional practice to keep current students connected to the history of the former students who came before them. Figure 7 shows the faculty and staff and students passing through the Memorial Chime Tower on graduation day.

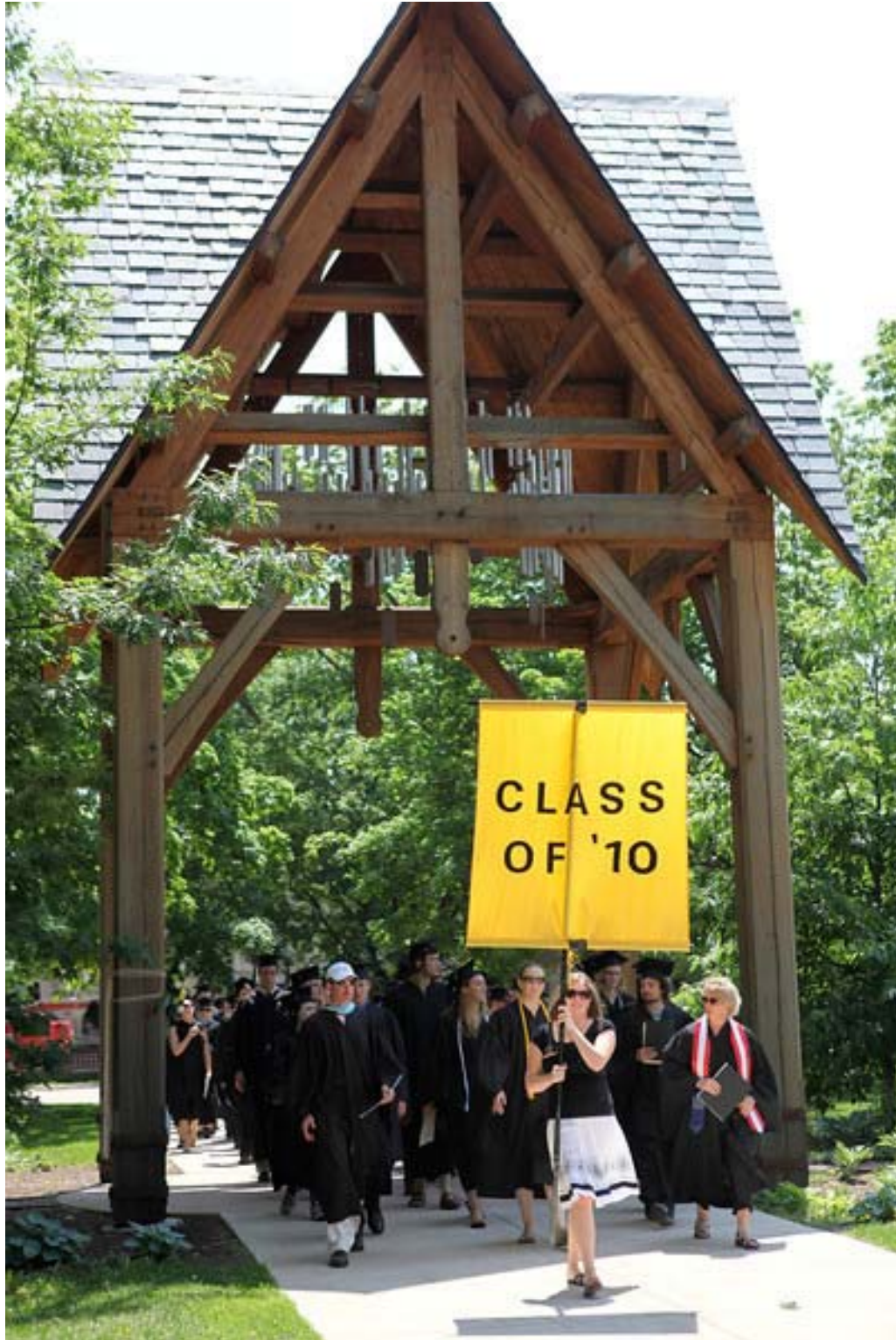


Figure 7. Walking under the Memorial Chime Tower, 2010. Copyright 2010 by St. Gregory's College. Reprinted with permission.

The Memorial Chime Tower has become a place of closure and a place of peace for families, students, staff, and faculty. For the staff and faculty members who created this concept and worked together to build it, they now have the comfort of knowing that every student who has ever died at St. Gregory College will be remembered in the same equitable manner.

The symbol of the community. The Memorial Chime Tower, in addition to providing a memorial and a place of closure and peace for families also represents a culture of people who care about the college; respect each other and the students.

According to the president,

I think what that chime tower sort of symbolizes is a community in which everyone really has a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the place. I mean, all these people, there were faculty members, staff members piled in busses, went up to Northern [name], camped, built that thing, brought it back.

He continued,

The whole body got in on it. And I think what enables—to the extent that we're able to absorb things like the loss of a student or the loss of a campus pastor, which is very difficult for people, is precisely because there is no one person who is responsible for it—it's a responsibility everyone feels.

Not only did the building of the Memorial Chime Tower create a sense of responsibility for all those involved in the project, but for some it developed a sense of pride and responsibility, and continued care. The assistant director of facilities, who played a key role in the creation and the building of the Memorial Chime Tower, has personally taken on the continued care and maintenance of the structure. That has not always been an easy

task since the pigeons in the area like to spend time on it, which makes it challenging to keep clean. His role has really changed and he no longer is in the hands-on carpenter role he was in at the time they built the Memorial Chime Tower. He has since been promoted to a higher-level position that would not normally involve this type of maintenance work, but he is still connected to it and takes pride in it. He described,

Being a part of that chime tower has been a real deep piece. I don't even know how I'd describe it from my perspective. But I do see it as a memorial and something that really needs to be cared for. (John)

For the staff member who worried that his son's friend would not be remembered, he now could rest assured he would be remembered the same as every other student who had died, no matter what the reason or no matter what their role was at the college.

The Importance of Moving On

Several of the participants talked about how they personally, as well as the college, moved on after the death of the student. Some participants had no choice. In the most recent death of a student, two participants needed to move on quickly due to job responsibilities to attend to during the same time of the student death. In particular, the public safety officer involved in the most recent death immediately needed to move on to another request for service, as he indicated:

It may sound weird, but a jump start needs to happen and it's very easy for us to turn around and then go deal with something fairly mundane after dealing with something a little more traumatic, you know and that's just part of the job.

(Daniel)

Much like Daniel, the class dean was managing a student-related crisis in a different residence hall while her colleagues were dealing with the immediacy of the student death. For some of the staff, their immediate job responsibilities continued despite the tragedy that had occurred.

The college is going to be okay. Other participants talked about the intentionality of moving on and concrete steps they took to assist both the college and students to move on. The president talked about how important it is for the college to deal with the crisis at hand, recognize its significance and move on. He framed this in reference to crisis management and not necessarily limiting it to the death of a student. He acknowledged his role as one of facilitating communication and letting people know that things are going to be okay, and that the college had the ability and resources to deal with the crisis.

In addition, the staff who worked closely with the students during a death of one of their classmates clearly understood and valued the importance of taking the time to grieve and recognize the significance of what occurred, while also understanding when it is time for the college to move on.

Helping students move on. Both Patricia from residence life and Sandra from the Dean of Students Office talked about being intentional about assisting students in moving on after the death of a student. Patricia talked about how sometimes it is easier for someone in her role to move on, but she was very conscientious about remembering the students and how everyone moves at their own speed. Patricia gave an example of how, after a student death, she changed the housing assignments for the next year. She wanted to give students a fresh start, and thus reassigned the female residence hall floor where

the student had died to a male residence hall floor the following year. Students were then required to sign up for a different floor, which ultimately gave them a fresh start.

Sandra, who worked closely with students, also talked about making deliberate decisions as she assisted students in moving on. She described her work with students in this way:

I think sort of the disbelief for them, because it's something that happens—it's outside the realm of possibility. There are a lot of things that are outside the realm of possibility when you're 18 and 19 and 20. But the things you walk around thinking about don't involve the death of your friends or yourself.

She continues,

You're trying to help them find the balance between the world does move on as much as you don't want it to or you can't believe that it does, it just does. And it doesn't mean that this is going to go unnoticed, it doesn't mean you're not impacted by it. We'll work through it and how it's going to move on for you is going to depend on how you're impacted by it and how we work out moving on from it.

Sandra, as well as the other participants, realized how dealing with death in their professional careers had impacted their lives and how they too have learned how to move on, although they will never forget the individual students who died while attending their college.

Description of the Themes

After interviewing the participants and hearing about their experiences, reviewing the Web site, and my journal, five themes emerged. The first theme was the involvement

of the whole campus community in the response to the death of a student. The second theme was having a president who is seen as the comforter of the community. The third theme was every student remembered. The fourth theme was the building of an eternal visual memorial together. Finally, the fifth theme was the college moving on after the death of a student.

Theme 1: Involvement of the whole campus community. When I interviewed the participants, it was clear that each of them was involved in the campus and saw the college as a special place that had meaning in their lives. It was much more than a place of employment. I think this was apparent through the longevity of many employees. Many consider their colleagues as friends and family members. JoAnne from the Stewardship Office referenced Randy, the vice-president for student life, as someone she has known for “a zillion” years. John from the Facilities Department referred to the college as a unique environment, and equated deaths and retirements to a family loss.

Another indication of the community involvement is the participation of staff members from departments who may not normally respond to a student death. The contributions of the three members from the Facilities Department were indicative of the involvement of a broader community when responding to a student death. In particular, the time spent by Linda, a custodian, in making sure that the roommate did not have to see the state of the room and waiting after her shift to talk to the family of the student she never met because she lived in a building that she cleaned. The former pastor talked about the entire community taking responsibility for grief counseling and that he never felt alone in responding to grief. Also, the pastor talked of the involvement of both Paul and John from the Facilities Department in the design of the Memorial Chime Tower, as

well as their contributions to the completion, dedication, and now maintenance of the structure.

In addition, the president acknowledged the importance of the community involvement when he referenced the Memorial Chime Tower. He believed that no one person had the responsibility for responding to the death of a student; it is a responsibility everyone felt.

The president modeled this behavior by responding to the death of a student by comforting the student's roommate and taking on a pastoral type role during the crisis; allowing those who were experts in responding to crises do their work. Several staff members mentioned that they appreciated the role he assumed during that difficult time.

Many of the traditions that the staff of St. Gregory engaged in during and after the death of a student involved staff members from different departments. Having traditions such as special recognition during commencement, endowed scholarships, and a visible, permanent memorial all resulted in staff members from various departments playing a role in executing each of those traditions. Having shared these responsibilities across divisions increased the involvement of people from throughout the college. James from the Campus Activities Office, who had shared the story about remembering his friend through the illumination ceremony before graduation, was excited about the possibility of his department taking responsibility for planning that meaningful event. JoAnne from the Stewardship Office talked about making phone calls when she noticed that the Memorial Chime Tower might need some cleaning or physical attention. Involvement of the community in responding to the death of a student was a theme supported by many statements and stories relayed by participants at St. Gregory College.

Theme 2: President as comforter of the community. The president of any organization certainly has the opportunity to influence the culture and people of its institution. The president at St. Gregory has taken the time to acknowledge the importance of death in the lives of the faculty, staff, and students on campus. As previously mentioned, during the time of my interview, it had been a particularly difficult semester for the college community, who had lost a beloved pastor on campus. He spent time with community members acknowledged the death of their loved ones and hand-wrote notes to the individuals who experienced a loss. The president made a point to tell me that he felt strongly about hand-written notes. In the age of technology, this gesture was important to him and meaningful to others.

The story regarding the president immediately leaving his meeting with the donors when he found out a student died revealed his understanding of his role on campus. There was no second-guessing where he needed to be. He knew he needed to be in the residence hall where the student had just died. He took on a role of comforter with the roommate of the student who died. After some time had passed, since the student died, the president mentioned that he made sure he acknowledged the staff regarding their roles in response to the death of a student. He acknowledged the toll it took on them. He was also a comforter for the staff members.

In addition, when I asked the president if he thought his role was at all shaped by the faith of the college, he affirmed that, indeed, both his role and the role of the college were different due to the nature of the faith-based institution. He talked about the resources, the rituals for expressing grief, and the pastoral care on a faith-based campus.

He used the word “humongous” when describing the differences between a faith-based school and a secular institution.

His actions of acknowledging death in the lives of community members through hand-written notes, comforting the roommate of the student who died, and taking the time to acknowledge death on campus all support the theme of his role as the comforter of the community.

Theme 3: Every student remembered. The third theme of remembering every student was supported by several stories as shared by participants. In preparation for the Memorial Chime Tower, one participant, Sandra, worked closely with the archivist and staff in the Alumni Office to find the names of every student who had ever died while attending St. Gregory. She indicated, “We looked to see what information did the Alumni Office have. . . . We asked alumni, we put word out to the alumni that we were looking for the name of anybody who had died while a student”. In addition, Sandra talked about a sister of an alumnus who called the campus when she heard about the Memorial Chime Tower, being concerned that her brother might not be recognized due to the nature of his death. Paul, had shared a similar concern that his son’s friend, because he was a new transfer student, would not be remembered in the way that other students had been recognized. This student was not only new to campus but not part of the “in” crowd. Both the alumnus’ sister and Paul were assured that no matter how the student died, or how well he was known, both would be remembered in a public, consistent way with the Memorial Chime Tower.

Theme 4: The building of an eternal visual memorial together. The creation and eventual building of a permanent memorial on campus was by far the most prevalent

theme that emerged in this study. Not only has this project resulted in every student being remembered, but it has impacted both the lives and careers of the participants in the project, the families of the students who died and the current campus culture. This response of creating a Memorial Chime Tower by St. Gregory has been by far the most impactful gesture that this college has made in response to the death of a student. As referenced by Randy, every aspect of the development of the project, from the initial drawing on a napkin to the decision to add chimes that were tuned to their signature song, resulted in a magical project.

The college president referred to the Memorial Chime Tower as a symbol of the community. The staff and faculty who collaboratively worked on the project forged relationships that still existed today. Many of these staff and faculty are seen as leaders on the campus today. The former pastor fondly referenced it as a place of peace and closure. Family members of students who have died have returned to campus to hang their child's chime or request a scissors lift to be raised high enough to see their child's chime. Staff and family members have experienced very deep emotions during the dedication of the Memorial Chime Tower and future dedications of new chimes.

One mother called a staff member on windy days and asked him to stand outside so she can hear the chimes ring. Students have been seen camping out underneath it and leaving prayer-filled notes for their deceased friends. One participant makes sure he walks by the Memorial Chime Tower when he walks on campus in between meetings, and current students walk by the memorial on their way to the commencement exercises. John, Paul, and Randy all talked about how being a part of the Memorial Chime Tower was a highlight of their career, and Randy's life was changed as he developed a hobby in

woodworking. Story after story from many of the participants confirmed the significance of the Memorial Chime Tower from the creation and hands-on building to its maintenance and care today.

Theme 5: Moving on. The final theme that emerged was the ability for the people of the college to move on after a crisis on campus. Two of the participants shared examples of how they needed to move on with their jobs immediately after the death of the most recent student. This may have involved responding to another task at the same time, such as what Sandra and her colleague did. During the same time that the most recent student died, two students from a different residence hall had a bat flying in their room. Sandra and her colleague had to have the bat captured and have it tested for rabies; it was something that needed immediate attention, or, as Daniel mentioned, that as a public safety officer he needed to engage in a mundane activity that needed immediate attention following his response to the death of a student.

Several participants talked about assisting students in moving on. The residence life professionals made the decision to change the housing assignments for the next semester so students would not have the option to return to the same floor where they had experienced the death of their friend.

For the overall college and making a decision to move on, I think the president summarized it the best when he said,

I think in crisis situations, one of the things people look for are signs that, despite the crisis, the college is going to do okay and that the organization has the ability to absorb whatever the crisis was, recognize its importance, respond appropriately if you have to, but then continue with its work. And I think if you're the

president, that part of your job is to be the person who both communicates and embodies that.

The president, along with the other staff members, recognized and valued the importance of moving on when the timing was right.

Summary

The purpose of interpretive research is one of understanding. I studied one campus, and have described and interpreted the experiences of some of the staff members who have been involved in the response to the death of a student. Through their experiences and my interpretation, five themes have emerged that contribute to their unique responses to the death of a student at a faith-based college. Most of the participants in this study were seasoned professionals who worked together for a long period of time. Because of this longevity and familiarity as colleagues, they had established both formal and informal ways of interacting when it came to responding to a student death. They had confidence in each other and respected one another's role when responding to the death of a student.

The first theme that emerged was in regards to the involvement of the community in a student death. The theme reflected a campus culture where everyone felt a responsibility and commitment to the campus beyond their individual roles in their department.

The second theme was about the role as the president as the comforter of the community. Not only did he acknowledge that this was his role, but the staff did as well. While the president had many other roles at the college, the role during a crisis as one of

comforter for the community was repeatedly mentioned and valued at this faith-based college.

The third theme of all students remembered through the Memorial Chime Tower was made possible not only by the financial donation of the former faculty member, but also due to the time and energy of so many staff and faculty.

The designing and building of the Memorial Chime Tower was by far the most visible and prominent response to the death of a student on St. Gregory's campus, and the fourth theme. The decision to design and erect a memorial in a prominent place on campus was a reflection of the individuals on campus who felt so strongly about remembering students in a consistent and visible manner. This was a decision that has and will impact the campus for years to come, and it is a strong message about the value that St. Gregory places on human life.

The final theme was an acknowledgement that in spite of the tragic and difficult nature of the death of a young student, it was important for the college and everyone else to move on when the time was right.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

My interest in studying the response of a faith-based institution stems from my own experience as a student affairs professional and dean of students at a private, faith-based university. I wanted to gain a deep understanding of how one college responded to the death of an undergraduate student, both organizationally as well as in their response to the emotional impact on the campus. In addition, I wanted to understand the thoughts and feelings of the professional staff members who responded.

I had a heartfelt interest in learning how another school handled this delicate matter. I knew how my own university handled it, and I knew about best practices in the field of student affairs, but I really wanted to gain in-depth knowledge about this topic.

The final chapter will highlight the themes that emerged in this study and the literature that supports the themes. In addition, I will address the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, practical implications for the field of organization development, my interpretations of the findings, and my own personal reflection.

Discussion of Findings

St. Gregory's has an informal protocol in place when responding to the death of a student. The process is led by staff members within the Division of Student Affairs. In addition to learning about their organizational efforts, which included their protocol and communication, I also learned how the college responded personally to individual students and family members following a death. The college provided both informal and structured opportunities for community members to grieve. Being a faith-based college, there were some expected rituals for students to grieve in accordance with the faith of the

college. For example, the college chapel became a gathering space for students when a fellow student died, no matter what the faith of the student who passed away. In addition, the college established several distinctive and unique ways to remember students who had died.

The study's findings that reflected the faith-based college's response to an undergraduate student death are: the involvement of the whole campus community; the president as the comforter of the community; all students remembered; the building of an eternal, visual, memorial together; and moving on. The literature supports these themes.

Theme 1: Involvement of the whole campus community. The involvement of the whole campus community in response to a student death was the first theme in this study. As described in Chapter 4, staff, students, and faculty members throughout different departments and divisions were instrumental in the college's response at the time of a student death and in the intermediate and long-term remembrances.

The immediate response to a death of a student was organized by the staff members in the Dean of Students Office within the Division of Student Affairs. Student affairs staff members, along with public safety officers, typically respond to student emergencies, so it is not unusual for student affairs staff members to take the leadership role when responding to a student death on campus. It is also common practice for student affairs divisions to have a crisis response plan in place to respond to individual student circumstances, and ideally that plan supports the overall college or university full campus emergency plan (Jones, Haley, & Hemphill, 2010; LaBanc, et al., 2010). St. Gregory's informal crisis plan included the involvement of staff members from different divisions at the college. The literature on best practices for institutions of higher

education regarding campus emergencies stresses the importance and value of cross-departmental teams when responding to a crisis (Callahan & Fox, 2008; LaBanc et al., 2010; Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007). Although the staff members who responded to a student death were not an official crisis response team, they had collaborated and worked together many times in response to student emergencies on campus. Their past experience, as well as their familiarity with each other, was beneficial when responding to a death of a student. According to Patterson, Bird, Burks, Washington, Ellet and Daykin (2007), staff members, who have worked together in minor emergencies, benefit from those previously developed relationships when working together on a crisis such as a death of a student.

Following the immediate response, there were several staff and faculty members from across the college who were involved in the intermediate response, including consoling the family, planning the memorial service, and following up with grieving students. St. Gregory's is a small campus, and it is not unusual for smaller campuses to collaborate across departments and divisions within the campus structure (Ardaiolo & Callahan, 2012). In fact, student affairs staff members, who organized the crisis response plan, tend to seek partnerships outside of their own division (Ardaiolo & Callahan, 2012).

According to Jones et al. (2010), "Response to a campus crisis is everyone's job" (p. 167). At St. Gregory, in addition to the immediate and intermediate response to the death of a student, the staff and faculty from across the college were instrumental in the long-term memorials, specifically in the building of the Memorial Chime Tower, which now resides in the middle of the campus. The size of the campus, the staff's familiarity in working together in previous emergency situations, and the collaboration of staff and

faculty across the campus all contributed to the involvement of the whole campus community in response to a death of a student.

Theme 2: President as comforter of the community. As described in Chapter 4, the president as comforter of the community was a theme in this study. The president at St. Gregory was seen as a compassionate person who provided comfort to students, who just had a classmate die, and who acknowledged the death of loved ones by writing handwritten notes. He understood the importance of this role and it came very naturally to him. The president at St. Gregory had established himself as a caring and compassionate person who took time to acknowledge death within his campus community.

While reviewing the literature on the role of college and university presidents during a crisis, it was clear to me that the president has many different responsibilities. Some tasks may include making swift decisions and being the spokesperson for the college or university (Rinella, 2010). The president wears many hats during a crisis, but perhaps none more important than being a caring and compassionate person who acknowledges the pain that has been inflicted upon the campus and its members. According to a monograph written about disaster planning by college and university presidents, Rinella (2010) wrote, “In the end, how presidents deal with matters of the heart is an important part of how they are perceived as handling the overall crisis” (p.1).

In the history of higher education, there are some examples of presidents who have been involved in some high-profile tragedies at different campuses in the United States. One example comes from the president at Virginia Tech when referencing his role in the aftermath of their horrific tragedy in 2007. He personally met with as many

people as possible, including injured students. He acknowledged the sadness and grief they were feeling, along with the other community members, who had lost loved ones. He also let people know he was supportive of counseling and acknowledged that the grieving process was complex. Although he stayed focused on the mission of the university, he was instrumental in comforting the campus community and paying attention to the people who were most impacted by the tragedy (Hincker, 2012). Although, presidents have many responsibilities during a crisis, none is as important as the sensitivity to any loss of life. The president at St. Gregory embodied this role of compassion and comforter both during the time of a student death and also during the death of significant people in the lives of his staff and faculty.

Theme 3: Every student remembered. The third theme was about remembering every student. St. Gregory's made a commitment to memorialize every student who had died while attending the college. The former students are remembered equitably through consistent rituals at commencement, an annual endowed scholarship, and a chime with their name engraved on it hung in the Memorial Chime Tower.

The research regarding memorializing a student following a death on campus indicates there are many ways of recognizing students who die while attending an institution of higher education (Weber & Garlough, 2007). Depending on the college or university, some may have traditions or expectations around a memorial service, posthumous degrees, or other tangible ways of remembering the student (Griffin, 2007). Hamilton (2008) wrote about a memorial service at Purdue University each semester for any students who may have died during that semester. They call the service "Golden Taps," and it is a modest, nondenominational service where family members and friends

of the deceased are invited to attend and acknowledge the loss of life. This is one example of a consistent practice where every student who has died is recognized in an established, equitable manner.

In reviewing the literature, I discovered that one of the challenges for many institutions of higher education is that they do not have any type of overall policies in place on how to manage memorials for students (Weber & Garlough, 2007). This may lead to inconsistency in how students are remembered or memorialized. Establishing a consistent and equitable manner for memorializing every student who has ever died at an institution of higher education does not seem to be a systematic practice across institutions. Overall, my search turned up very little information on the topic of a consistent practice at other institutions.

Theme 4: The building of an eternal, visual memorial together. The fourth theme is about the building of a long-lasting, visual memorial by faculty, staff, and family members. As previously mentioned, having a large, physical memorial dedicated to every single student, who has died while being a student at the college, seems to be unique to St. Gregory's. The large memorial that is placed in the middle of campus is viewed as a symbol of the community.

In reviewing the literature on school memorials, the majority of research on the development of permanent memorials in education comes from the Department of Education and specifically references memorials in K-12; however, some of the information is relevant to institutions of higher education. Specifically, the literature suggests that educational institutions should plan carefully for any type of permanent memorial (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Memorials are part of culture and a

place to express emotion; therefore, when planning for memorials, institutions of education should take into consideration the emotional impact that the memorial may have on the students and families and include family members in the planning if possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The research on memorials at institutions of higher education indicated that many of the larger, more visible memorials are dedicated to one specific and tragic event. In reviewing the details of memorials on other college or university campuses, there are several examples of permanent structures dedicated to the deaths of students during a campus tragedy. Some examples include the Bonfire Memorial at Texas A & M, which is dedicated to the death of 11 students and one former student who died in a bonfire tragedy in 1999 (Paterson et al., 2007). Virginia Tech has a permanent memorial consisting of 32, engraved, 300-pound stones in honor of the students who were killed and injured on their campus in 2007 (<http://www.weremember.vt.edu/memorial.html>). Additionally, Kent State has a permanent memorial dedicated to their four students who were slain in 1970, and have had several traditions in place every year since then in their honor (<http://www.kent.edu/may-4th-memorials>). The planning and eventual building of each of these campus memorials took months, and in the case of Kent State, years after the initial event. Similar to St. Gregory, each of these institutions involved students and/or family members, along with the college officials, in the design, planning, and dedication of their permanent memorials.

What is different and perhaps unique about the permanent memorial at St. Gregory, however, is that it is dedicated to all students, who have died while attending the college, and not dedicated to one specific and tragic event. Additionally, the

memorial at St. Gregory was built directly by the faculty and staff at the college. As outlined in Chapter 4, many of the participants referenced this experience as being a highlight of their career. In addition, to the sense of accomplishment in building the memorial themselves they also had the experience of working together and building a bond and connection between the faculty and staff participants.

There is a lot of value in faculty and staff members getting to know each other and working closely together at institutions of higher education. At St. Gregory, the building of the Memorial Chime Tower together was a bonding experience that positively impacted the relationships of the participants, and certainly influenced their working relationships when back on campus. Best practices in higher education often recommend staff and faculty work collaboratively to create an integrated academic and student development experience for students (Skipper, 2005). Having forged relationships through building the Memorial Chime Tower, the faculty and staff continued those collaborative working relationships in program and academic development for students.

Theme 5: Moving on. The staff at St. Gregory took intentional steps to assist students in moving on following a death of a friend and a classmate, and the staff members and the president understood the value of letting people know the college was going to be okay and had the resources and resiliency to move on as a college.

The importance of college students making successful transitions during their college years has been well documented in research (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012). Not only is it important for their own developmental growth, but also their retention at the college or university (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Colleges and university staff need to pay attention to resources for grieving students and have a variety of ongoing

support that will assist students in their grief. Some students are ready to move forward before others; therefore, it is important to have both resources and policies in place that support grieving students moving on at their own pace (Balk, 2001). According to one source,

One of the most difficult parts of moving forward is to figure out how to balance remembering with living the daily life of a college campus filled with the opportunity for learning, fun, celebration, and sports. Everyone recovers in his own time and way. Many students will want to go back to their normal lives of going to class, being involved in campus groups, and hanging out on campus. Others will remain fixed in the event or remembering people they have lost. (“In Search of Safer Communities,” 2008)

Many colleges and universities are providing resources for students to assist with dealing with grief as one of many stressors in their lives. These resources are offered both through academic course work and through co-curricular programs outside of the classroom. Many colleges and universities have resources and programming through their counseling and health services on campus. These resources and programs assist students in developing healthy strategies and positive coping skills, which they will be able to incorporate into their lives both now and in the future. One author writes about the importance of becoming more resilient and learning to move forward, finding comfort in the memory of your loved one, and accepting grief as part of your life (Bonnano, 2009). Yet another author references living with grief and change in a healthy manner, rather than getting over it, and how one can make meaning of the grief (Boss, 2006). Boss

emphasized the role of meditation and mindfulness in helping people manage one's inner self during a time of loss when the outer world seems unmanageable.

In addition to assisting students in moving on, it is important that institutions of higher education convey confidence in their abilities to respond to a crisis where a student or students have lost their lives. Not only must a college or university convey that the institution cares, but that the leadership has the skills and resources to appropriately respond (Rinella, 2010). In addition, college and university presidents have a responsibility to think about the future of the institution. The president of Virginia Tech, in reflecting on their terrible tragedy, articulated that he had to consider the priorities of the university, saying, "I knew that we had to keep focused on the future and be true to our mission as a university. It was hard, but I forced myself to think beyond the crisis" (Hincker, 2012). It is the role of the leaders at an institution to appropriately respond to a student death or multiple deaths on a campus and also prepare for the recovery and future of the institution (Rinella, 2010).

My Interpretations of the Findings

What is the institutional response to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student at a private, faith-based college? This is the question that guided my research. I believe I answered my research question because I have now a thorough and in-depth understanding of one faith-based college's response to the death of an undergraduate student. I learned that the rituals and traditions that St. Gregory's established in response to a student death had become engrained into their campus culture. This culture was shaped by a president, who took the time to acknowledge death, and staff and faculty

members, who took the initiative to create a memorial that remembered and recognized every student, who had died while enrolled at the school.

When I reflected on my findings, the concept of culture as described by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede came to mind. Culture is a set of unwritten rules or customs shared with people who live in the same setting or environment (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010). According to these authors the culture can be described as layers of symbols, heroes, rituals and values (Hofstede et al., 2010) Therefore the following section is my interpretation of the findings through the lens of Hofstede's model of culture.

Symbols. The concept of symbols, which are described as the most superficial concept within the model of culture, are the gestures, objects or words that carry meaning to the specific culture in which they exist (Hofstede et al., 2010). At St. Gregory, there were many examples of symbols that evolved surrounding the death of a student. The empty chair at graduation with a single rose in honor of the student who had died, as well as the lighting of the lantern for the deceased student, were both examples of symbols that had specific meaning to their community. The most visible symbol was the Memorial Chime Tower. Located in the center of campus, the memorial was a symbol of the college's commitment to remembering every student who had died while attending the college.

Heroes. Heroes are role-models for behavior within a culture. An example of a hero in the St. Gregory's college culture was the president who spent time comforting the roommate of the student who had died. He even took the time to write personal notes when a significant death occurred in someone's life. The college members saw him as a

role-model within their campus community, and a hero within their culture. Another example of a hero was the custodian, who remained beyond her shift to meet the family of the student who died was a hero to her colleagues. Two participants shared the story about her heroic action and her commitment to the family of the deceased student even though it had been several years since that occurrence. While, the president and custodian were just two of many examples of heroes on campus, I could see a pattern in behaviors that was attributed to heroes in the college's culture, which is an ultimate care for others, the one that goes beyond roles, prescribed by job descriptions.

Rituals. The concepts of rituals, which tend to be a socially essential aspect of culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), include religious ceremonies. I observed several rituals on St. Gregory's campus, some pertained to the death of a student, and some were every day rituals. The memorial services, as well as the ceremony of the dedication of the individual chime in the Memorial Chime Tower were consistent rituals when a student died. Also, the ritual of walking through the Memorial Chime Tower on graduation day is an established annual ceremony on campus. Another example of a ritual included students buying flowers for classmates and having the flowers put into their campus mailboxes.

Some rituals have been in the community longer, some rituals were established recently, but they are passed on to new generations of students and employees as part of the college culture either formally through campus tours and orientation programs, or informally through conversations and story-telling. The result of this shared culture is that when a student dies, all community members know what to do, or where to go right away; they go to the Memorial Chime Tower.

The surrounding a student death all contributed to the culture of St. Gregory's. These practices and traditions were understood by the community members within the culture and each of the customs reflected the values of the St. Gregory's community.

Values. While the symbols, heroes, and rituals were the most visible elements of the college culture to me as an outsider, I knew that the essence of that culture was in the college's values. The symbols, heroes and rituals at St. Gregory following a student death were all practices that only reflected the values of the college. However gaining an understanding of the specific symbols, heroes and rituals at St. Gregory allowed me to discover the core values of the college. I was pleased to see that the values they lived were the same values they had espoused in their mission statement. These values were committing to the roots of the Christian gospel and developing the whole person in mind, body and spirit.

Other observations. The research process enabled me to weave fascinating stories and bits of subjective information together. Combined, this information led me to an understanding of the campus culture and to the development of five themes. As I reflect on the themes that emerged, some of the themes were probable and yet other themes surprised me. For example, I was not surprised that the president of a faith-based college functioned in a comforter role to the community. As the previous research indicated, the president often takes on a caring role during a crisis. However, what did surprise me was the time he spent acknowledging the death of loved ones during the academic year. So, although some of the themes were anticipated, there nuances that did surprise me.

The two themes, which surprised me the most, were the third theme of every student remembered, which ultimately led to the fourth theme of the building of an eternal, visual memorial as a community. I was touched by the care and thought that went into making sure every student, who had died while enrolled on campus, was treated in an equitable manner. The campus community members felt so strongly about fair treatment that it led to the building of a memorial that honored every student who died. The Memorial Chime Tower is now a part of the fabric of the community. They have developed rituals surrounding the memorial therefore; it is not seen as a morbid, sad, structure, but a place of music, prayer, peace, and even celebration. They have incorporated the memorial structure into their daily routines and traditions on campus which has contributed to a life-affirming culture. The students and faculty walk underneath the Memorial Chime Tower on graduation day, which is traditionally one of the happiest days in the academic year at an institution. The chimes create a beautiful sound, and at times can be heard throughout the campus. As previously mentioned, I was aware of the Memorial Chime Tower when I began my research on this campus, but had no idea that the college's staff and faculty had built the large structure. Staff and faculty tend to lead very busy lives; therefore, spending 10 days building the Memorial Chime Tower showed a major commitment to the students and the college.

In addition to the five themes that emerged, I gained insight on how the effect of responding to the death of a student can impact the staff members who respond. As I mentioned in the introduction, people do not choose the field of student affairs or careers in higher education thinking they will have to respond to death as part of their professional career.

Participants in the study were eager to talk about their experiences in working with students and families in response to a student death. It did not take a lot of prompting or probing to gain information from the participants. They were excited to share information and stories. As previously mentioned, some of the participants were emotional during the interviews as they recalled students who had died and the circumstances surrounding their death. My sense was that some of the participants may have not have finished processing their feelings or thoughts around the death before this time, and the interviews brought back some painful memories. The overall culture in the United States tends to be death averse, which does not always provide opportunities for people to discuss death. While organizationally the student death seemed to be dealt with, on an individual level, many people had lingering feelings of grief. I assume that people, who needed a longer period of transition from grief to normal life, carried remains of grief and sad feelings that were still being processed. It felt like my research provided them with both an opportunity and venue to talk about their feelings and experiences surrounding death.

One more thing I found interesting, namely a dichotomy of people's experience. Along with their feelings of grief, they also felt pride in providing comfort to and caring about students and families during a difficult time in their lives. While the participants did not talk specifically about this dichotomy, I could sense both grief and pride in their stories. The dichotomy of people's experiences became an integral part of their professional response to a student death.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations which may have impacted this study. One limitation of the study was about the timing of the most recent death for St. Gregory's campus. The last death of an undergraduate student at St. Gregory was 2008. For the purposes of this study, that time frame was a limitation. Much of technology has changed since 2008. There are new ways of communicating and information moves quickly, which would certainly impact the college's strategy on communicating information about a student death. Another limitation which may have impacted the outcome of the study is the specific faith of the college. St. Gregory is a Lutheran college, and had this same study been conducted at a different faith-based school, it might have yielded different findings.

Suggestions for Future Research

There were several potential topics that surfaced during this study that were not discussed. Each of these topics may warrant additional research. Topics that emerged in the study were the grief that a faculty feels when a student dies, the responses of the families who lost a child, and self-care for staff who respond to a death on campus.

When interviewing the former pastor, I learned about the profound grief that he had observed among professors when a student died. He indicated how difficult it had been for individual professors who had students die, especially when the professor taught or advised the student. In this study, all participants were staff and administrators. I did not interview any professors regarding the death of a student on campus. It would be interesting to study faculty at a faith-based institution regarding their individual grief and responses to a death of an undergraduate student.

Another area of research would be the families of college students, who have died, and hear their perspective of how the college handled their child's death; in particular, families who have had a child attend a faith-based institution. This was not the focus of my study, but it would be another interesting perspective.

The third area of research would be studying how college campus professionals, who respond to student death, take care of themselves when there is a death of a student on campus. In this study, several people shared stories of their own sadness at the loss of a student, and even years later, as they recalled the death of a student, their eyes filled with tears. Responding to a death on campus certainly takes a toll on the responders and research on how staff members deal with the stress of responding to student death warrants more research.

Implications for Organization Development Practitioners

College students are facing a lot of transitions in their lives and have an increasing number of demands placed on them. Health-care providers and mental-health professionals on college campuses are seeing an increase of mental-health related issues in the traditional-age college students. In addition to the normal stressors that accompany college life, if students are also experiencing grief, that can have an enormous impact on their mental and physical health and their ability to stay in college. In addition, many college students sacrifice sleep due to academics, work schedules, and social demands. The fast-paced cultures on many campuses make it difficult to stop and take time to grieve. Organization development (OD) practitioners, who are experts in change, can work with college and university administrators in developing a culture that helps students cope with stress, transition, and grief. Many OD practitioners incorporate

mindfulness and/or meditation as a strategy to cope with change. OD practitioners can work with health-care providers, psychologists, and wellness professionals on campus to create a culture of mindfulness, where students can learn to live with change and grief.

Personal Reflections

I have worked in student affairs in higher education for my entire 30-year career. Although, I have been at the three different institutions, the majority of time I have been at one private, faith-based university. I have been the dean of students for more than 13 years, and during that time have responded to the death of several students. Although, it has been a significant professional experience, each and every time has been heart-wrenching. While representing the university in the best manner possible, my colleagues and I have made it our first priority to respond appropriately and sensitively to the families, who have lost a child, and the students, who have lost a friend.

Having a significant role in the response to a student death is overwhelming and I empathized with my colleagues at St. Gregory when they shared stories about communicating with the families, planning a memorial service, or talking to a grieving student. I know how daunting those responsibilities are and yet how important and significant they can be too. Having been in this role many times, I have at times found comfort in the tasks themselves. Depending on the circumstances of death, and whether or not I knew the student, I have my own feelings to process, in addition to my role and responsibilities as a university administrator. Having a specific role in the death of a student, helps me contribute in a meaningful way to a family, and campus members who are grieving. I recall one incident on my own campus when a student was missing for one month. A small group of staff members met every work day during that month to respond

to the issues that arose daily regarding the missing student. We supported the family, who was temporarily living on our campus, supported his friends, who continued to search for him, responded to media and campus officials, worked with both the police, and local community organizations. Sharing these experiences with my colleagues and performing my responsibilities helped carry the burden. Much of my days were filled with tasks and responsibilities related to the missing student and I felt good knowing I was contributing to the efforts to bring closure to the family and campus community. Because of my role, and all of the responsibilities I took on, I did not take the time to respond emotionally to the incident until it was over and the student was found. That month was the most difficult month of my career and I remember having an unhealthy physical reaction to the stress and grief that had accumulated during that month.

So, during my research, when Sandra talked about having a physical reaction in response to the impending communication to a family, I was reminded of my own physical reaction and similar feelings that I had during the difficult month on my own campus. Similarly to Sandra's description, I had a tightness in my chest and my own inability to breathe in response to our student's death. When JoAnne referenced a memorial service where everyone in attendance was weeping, I recalled attending memorial services on my own campus and how painful they have been and the sorrow I have experienced when a student has died. Interviewing colleagues at another school who had similar experiences, validated for me my own response to a student death. In the member checking process, the former chaplain wrote a comment about how his campus responded to grief and how one looks for compassion and authenticity more than a check

list. His written comment also affirmed and mirrored to me my own response of compassion to a student death on my campus.

Another insight for me occurred both when I was interviewing the participants, and again when I did the member checking. While interviewing the participants, I wondered how the participants would respond if someone was doing the same study on my campus. I was not sure how my own colleagues would have responded to some of the questions I posed to the participants. It reminded me that we, as campus professionals, who respond to a student death, do not debrief or process our own thoughts or feelings following a death of a student as we probably should. We often move very quickly from one emergency to the next crisis or event occurring on campus. I was reminded of this behavior again when I did my member checking. I received an e-mail from one of my participants in response to Chapter 4. She wrote,

I thoroughly enjoyed reading your chapter 4! You did capture our stories and our hearts. I found it fascinating to read my colleagues accounts about your topic. I don't know that we have ever been in the same room to discuss our feelings about the loss of our students. Your chapter makes me even more proud to be a member of this community. (JoAnne)

Similar to colleagues on my campus, our counterparts at St. Gregory had not formally discussed their emotions or thoughts in response to a student death. My research provided a venue for the participants to continue processing information. Sharing my chapter 4 with the participants provided an opportunity to mirror the whole picture back to the individual participants. Some of the participants understood their role in response to a death of a student but did not fully understand their colleague's roles or feelings until

they read my chapter 4. Reading about their colleagues feelings regarding student death validated their own feelings. Nearing the completion of writing this dissertation, St. Gregory experienced a student death. I received an e-mail from Randy, one of the participants, and he said, “Your work down here has actually been a blessing to us as we work our way through this. You helped more than you can know.” For the participants, having a recent opportunity to process their feelings, and talk about their response to a death, was helpful to them as they were now in the midst of responding to another student death. Responding to a death of a student on a college campus takes a toll on the involved staff and administrators. Therefore it is critical that we provide training for the staff as well as opportunities to process their own feelings. It is important that the staff members, who respond to student death, take care of themselves, so they in turn are able to respond to the campus community.

Similarly to my counterpart at St. Gregory’s, I have continued to keep in contact with some of the families who lost a child to death while being in college. Some of the families have established a scholarship in their child’s name and some have returned to campus for different events. Having intermittent contact with the families of students, who have died, keeps the family connected to the institution and continues the personal connection through an administrator. I have enjoyed the contacts with the families and it has been helpful to see the families incorporate their child’s college memories into their current lives. At this time, my institution has established some traditions in remembering students who have died; yet it does not have a consistent practice in establishing long-term memorials for every student who has died.

Each of the themes that emerged in this study contributed to my knowledge about the response to a death on campus. In addition to the five themes, I have also gained knowledge around the importance of having policies in place, both for students, who are grieving, and overall policies for the creation of memorials in honor of students who have died. I have come to fully appreciate the value of colleagues working together either in a formal or informal manner to respond to the death of a student. I have discovered the value of creating a culture on campus that recognizes the value of life and death both through rituals, symbols and heroes. And most importantly in the end, this research confirmed the value of competent, authentic, and caring professionals, who respond to the death of an undergraduate student on a college or university campus.

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Appendix A

E-Mail Recruitment Letter to Participants

Dear <<name>>,

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of St. Thomas and about to begin my research stage of the dissertation and I would like to invite you to participate in my study, entitled: What is the Institutional Response to the Unexpected Death of an Undergraduate Student at a Private, Faith-Based College?

The study itself will focus on the process that the institution undertakes when an undergraduate student dies. I will not be asking specific information regarding individual students.

If you agree to be a participant in the study, I will ask you to participate in a 45-60 minute interview in a private location on the St. Olaf campus. Participation is voluntary. The identity of all participants will be kept confidential as well as information gathered during the study. I have received permission from the administration at St. Olaf to undertake this study. No personally identifiable information will be shared in the findings and I will not share the name of the college.

If you have responded to the death of an undergraduate student sometime within the past ten years (either on or off campus) please consider participating in this study. Your participation may have meant interaction with the student death itself or with the family, responding to friends or classmates of the student. It also may mean that you did not know the student but may have been involved in the follow up response in some capacity.

If you are interested in participating please contact me at kmlange@stthomas.edu
or (651-492-5938.) to schedule an interview and discuss consent forms.

Sincerely,

Karen Lange

Doctoral Candidate

University of St. Thomas

Appendix B

Consent Form

University of St. Thomas

What is the Institutional Response to the Unexpected Death of an Undergraduate Student at a Private Faith-Based College?

IRB#520214-1

Dear Participant:

I am undertaking a research study related to the response of a faith based college to the unexpected death of an undergraduate student. I am interested in understanding how one college responds in such a situation. I am inviting you to participate because of your role in responding to a death on or off campus. My hope is to understand the process itself through the experience of those staff members who have been a respondent. You are eligible to participate if you have responded in some manner to a student death within the past ten years.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not you would like to participate. The researcher, Karen Lange, is a Doctoral Candidate of Organization Development, at the University of St. Thomas. The research advisor is Dr. Alla Heorhiadi, Professor in the College of Education, Leadership and Counseling at the University of St. Thomas.

Procedures: If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a single interview of approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask for your consent to be audio recorded. The interview will be transcribed and both the transcription and audio recording will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Risks and Benefits: There are no potential risks to the knowledge of the researcher. There is no financial compensation for participation.

Confidentiality: Your answers will be kept confidential and you will be given a pseudo name to protect your identity. However, it is important to know that the college itself might be identified in published materials. All data will be kept confidential and destroyed at the end of the study. Neither the dissertation nor any subsequent publications will identify you individually; however, the title or role you have at the institution may be identified.

Voluntary Nature of the Research: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer specific questions or withdraw from the study at any time. If you withdraw from the study all data collected will be eliminated from the study.

Contact and Questions: You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in the study. You may contact Karen Lange at (651)492-5938 or kmlange@stthomas.edu or Dr. Alla Heorhiadi at (651) 962-4457 or aheorhiadi@stthomas.edu . If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board.

Consent: If you wish to participate in this study and will be interviewed you are voluntarily making a decision to participate. Your signature below certifies that you have decided to participate and have read and understood the information on this form. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher Karen Lange

Date