



Bereavement Policies and Practices Toward an Inclusive Community of Care

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DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE

College student bereavement is much more prevalent than one might expect. Research suggests that around 37 to 44% of college students report the death of someone significant to them (i.e., family member or close friend) in the last two years (Cousins et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2015), and 22% to 30% college students are in the first 12 months of grieving (Balk, 2011). These estimates are likely more prevalent in recent years, given that as of December 13, 2023, more than a million deaths due to COVID-19 have been recorded in the US (World Health Organization, 2023). It is estimated that for every COVID-19 death, nine family members are bereaved, in addition to bereaved friends or community members (Verdery, 2020). Research suggests that following loss, young adults may experience difficulty concentrating (Cupit et al., 2016) and have lower GPAs than their matched non-grieving peers during the semester of their death loss (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Further, college students are particularly vulnerable to adverse outcomes after loss due to academic pressures and because they are away from home and often lack strong support from those closest to them (Balk, 2011). In fact, students often describe isolation, lack of support, and decreased sense of belongingness (Servaty-Seib & Fajgenbaum, 2015), and are at risk for dropping out of college at higher rates than their matched non-grieving peers (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

According to current UMD Policy V-1.00(G), death in the family is considered an example of a “compelling circumstances beyond the student’s control” that justifies an excused absence. The excused absence policy does not delineate specific accommodations for bereavement but rather broadly states that for university-sanctioned excused absences, the student must be provided academic accommodation, within reason, that neither advantages nor disadvantages the student or their classmates. For makeup work that is not feasible, the excused absence policy states that an alternate accommodation will be provided. In the case students feel they have been unfairly denied excused absence or appropriate accommodation, students are directed to seek resolution with the course instructor first, after which they may file an appeal with the Chair of the department for departmental units or the Dean in the case of non-departmentalized and interdepartmental programs.

Ultimately, discretion is left to individual instructors as to whether and how a student’s experience of death loss should be accommodated as a “compelling circumstance.” This creates challenges as students attempt to navigate different responses from instructors to their loss and seek accommodations while simultaneously experiencing bereavement (with particularly disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities; see below). A review of the literature found that staff and faculty responses to student bereavement were regularly inadequate, unempathetic, and/or unhelpful in guiding students toward the next steps (Hay et al., 2022). In the absence of established policies and guidelines on how to address the needs and concerns of grieving students, faculty may find themselves unprepared or unsure of how to provide the necessary and appropriate support. Thus, the development of formal bereavement policies would not only work to support the academic and

emotional well-being of bereaved students but also support faculty in adequately and fairly responding to grieving students regarding absences and extensions. Echoing nationwide calls for compassionate and inclusive student bereavement leave policies (Actively Moving Forward, n.d.), we propose a review and fundamental redesign of the established policies and practices concerning student bereavement at the University of Maryland.

### **Restricting Bereavement to “Immediate Family” is Problematic**

One of the fundamental shortcomings of existing bereavement leave policies adopted by other organizations is the narrow interpretation of kinship. Bereavement policies (including current policies for University faculty and staff), as well as general perceptions of “valid” bereavement experiences in U.S. culture, are often defined in terms of “immediate” family, such as spouse, parent, child, grandparent, grandchild, sibling, in-law, or step-relative (Purdue Student Support Services, 2023; University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Office of the Dean of Students, 2023). This interpretation is based on the nuclear family model, which has largely decreased in recent years. In fact, the share of “traditional” family models dropped from 67% in 1970 to 37% in 2021 (Aragão et al., 2023), while the number of people living in multigenerational households doubled during the same timespan (Cohn et al., 2022). The landscape of family structures in the US has significantly evolved beyond the traditional model. Defining bereavement policies in terms of “immediate” family or leaving the decision up to individual instructors as to what constitutes a valid loss unjustly limits the people one is officially sanctioned or “allowed” to grieve, ultimately disenfranchising a large group of the bereaved students whose loss does not fall under the umbrella of “immediate family.”

### ***Loss of Friends in the College Context***

Many college students experience the death of a close friend/peer, often in a sudden, unexpected, and possibly traumatic way (e.g., car accidents, suicide). However, given that close friends often fail to be included in the definition of “immediate family” in organizational bereavement policies, they may not be able to have the same allowances to mourn their significant loss. Research suggests that closeness to the deceased is an important factor that relates to the intensity of one’s grief (and is one of the risk factors for prolonged grief disorder, or PGD; Glickman, 2021), further highlighting how biological kinship may not always be the defining element of how one is affected by the loss (Cupit et al., 2022).

### ***Impacts on LGBTQ+ Communities and Communities of Color***

For many, close family is not limited to “immediate family” members or to biological relatives. Designating non-biological family members as kin is particularly significant for marginalized communities, including people of color and LGBTQ+ people (Hull & Ortyl, 2019; Nelson, 2013; Taylor et al., 2013). Especially for communities of color, extended family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, and cousins) can be central to the primary family unit (Gerstel, 2011; Tam et al., 2017). For LGBTQ+ people, “immediate family” may especially leave out relationships of deep importance in their lives, given many experience rejection from their families of origin (Hailey et al., 2020; Newcomb et al., 2019; Pease et al., 2022; Tasker et al., 2018). This leaves the bereaved individual without the option to access bereavement leave/absences. Ultimately, defining family in terms of a nuclear family model fails to capture culturally diverse understandings of family and recognize the existence of chosen family members, particularly for LGBTQ+ people and people of color.

### **Bereavement Leave Duration Should Be Inclusive of Diverse Needs**

Responses to bereavement vary greatly across cultures and are frequently overlooked in bereavement policy. Cultural considerations play a pivotal role in shaping effective bereavement policies. Western mourning customs typically involve holding a funeral within days of the individual's passing (Oyebode & Owens, 2013). Nevertheless, it's essential to recognize that this does not adequately reflect the variety of bereavement rituals found in culturally diverse practices. For example, death in Hindu families is often mourned by family and friends in a 12-day ritual (Laungani &

Laungani, 2015). Muslim mourning practices typically involve gathering to read the Quran for 40 days, with particular emphasis on the first three days (Oyebode & Owens, 2013). Orthodox Jews often observe a period of mourning known as shiva that lasts for seven days, during which the bereaved often stay at home while friends and community members come to offer condolences and support (Rubin, 2014). In fact, traditionally, the shiva period prohibits individuals from attending to usual daily activities, including going to work or school. The limited days provided for bereavement leave disproportionately impact international students (who may also have to travel out of the country for services) and students with marginalized identities. Ultimately, grief is a deeply personal and culturally influenced experience, varying widely across cultures. Understanding and respecting cultural nuances in mourning practices and rituals is essential for crafting policies that provide meaningful support to individuals navigating loss. By acknowledging the diversity in grieving processes through flexibility in bereavement leave duration, bereavement policies can become more inclusive and responsive to the needs of students with diverse cultural backgrounds. This inclusivity reflects empathy and respect and fosters a supportive work environment that recognizes the unique ways individuals cope with loss based on their cultural context.

## **DESCRIPTION OF CHANGE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE**

### **Establishing a Student Bereavement Policy**

The University has committed to “become a connected, coordinated, and effective community of care that supports the success and well-being of students, faculty, and staff” (University of Maryland, 2022, p. 13). The University of Maryland should adopt and implement a student bereavement policy. Sample language for such a policy adapted from Purdue University Student Support Services (2023) is provided in Appendix A. This policy:

- Should allow for academic accommodations for a length of time that is inclusive of a) bereavement practices across cultures and b) people who need to travel (domestically or internationally) to engage in mourning rituals, specifically providing additional excused absence days based on the distance from College Park, MD to the services (e.g., three additional excused absence days for travel beyond 300-mile radius of College Park, five additional excused absence days for travel outside the 48 contiguous United States);
- Should grant undergraduate students extended due dates and ongoing flexibility throughout the semester, recognizing that responses to bereavement are not linear and can fluctuate with time;
- Should include graduate students and support them in taking leave both from classes and graduate/teaching assistantships;
- Should not delineate which types of losses (e.g., immediate family versus close friend) qualify for bereavement leave;
- Should require that all teaching faculty and staff abide by the student bereavement policy to promote equitable accommodation access by all students; and
- Should formally empower the Office of the Dean of Students to grant additional flexibility on a case-by-case basis (See BIG10 peer institution Purdue University, which allows students to “petition for extended grief absence through the Office of the Dean of Students (ODOS) by meeting individually with an ODOS staff member for case evaluation”; Purdue Student Support Services, 2023).

### **Updating Faculty and Staff Bereavement Policy**

As the university considers changes to the student policy, the university should also push for changes to the staff/faculty bereavement leave system similar and equitable to those recommended above. Toward this end, University administration should advocate for changes at the University System of Maryland level.

## **Enhancing Inclusion and Equity in Campus Community-Wide Bereavement Responses**

The university should simultaneously consider establishing broader inclusive and affirming guidelines for supporting the broader university community in times of bereavement. For instance, trans and nonbinary people often are misgendered and/or deadnamed after death (Walters et al., 2023). As we consider campus-level responses to bereavement, failure to use affirming names and pronouns of trans people who have died has the potential to complicate the grief experience of the community as they contend with both the experience of bereavement and exposure to transphobia (Kelley & Knight, 2021; Nolan, 2020; Rummler, 2023). Additionally, the grief of people of color in response to racialized violence at the global, national, and local levels is inherently disenfranchised by systemic racism and white supremacy (Atallah, 2023; Cooper & Williams, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Harris & O'Brien, 2023). At the university level, failure to provide thoughtful and culturally competent campus-level responses, for instance, in the aftermath of the police murders of Black Americans (Diamondback Editorial Board, 2020) and the tragic murder of Lt. Richard Collins III (Haq & Campisi, 2017), can exacerbate the disenfranchisement of grief within communities of color by failing to recognize the impact of losing individuals who may not be personally known to community members or providing a cohesive approach to supporting bereaved faculty, staff, and students of color that acknowledges the role of systemic oppression. Thus, as the university considers policies that support bereaved individuals on campus, simultaneous consideration of inclusion and justice through campus-wide response protocols could provide valuable improvements to the support systems for community-wide experiences of bereavement.

### **SUGGESTION FOR HOW YOUR PROPOSAL WOULD BE PUT INTO PRACTICE**

#### **Establishing a Student Bereavement Policy**

The portion of this proposal regarding student bereavement policies should be charged to a Senate committee for the development of a formal policy. The committee(s) charged with the policy elements of this proposal should, at a minimum, consult with:

- Experts in multicultural perspectives in bereavement to provide insight into the need for an inclusive bereavement policy;
- Greta Jankauskaite, Ph.D. and experts in the psychology of bereavement to provide insight as a scientific expert in bereavement and related policies;
- The President's Commission on LGBTQ+ Issues and the LGBTQ+ Equity Center to provide insight on inclusive bereavement practices and needs for the LGBTQ+ community; and
- The Office of the Dean of Students to provide insight on the implementation of the proposal.

The policies established in response to this proposal should be implemented through campus student support services (e.g., Dean of Students) with appropriate collaboration from college/department designees (e.g., Directors of Undergraduate Studies) to create systems that reduce the administrative burden experienced by bereaved students and their course instructors.

#### **Advocating for Updating the Faculty and Staff Bereavement Policy**

The portion of this proposal regarding faculty/staff bereavement policies should be referred for administrative action by Division of Administration and other administrative units as appropriate, promoting advocacy at the University System of Maryland level in collaboration with the Board of Regents, University Presidents, University Human Resources, and relevant stakeholders across USM institutions.

## **Enhancing Inclusion and Equity in Campus Community-Wide Bereavement Responses**

The portion of this proposal regarding general inclusive and affirming campus-level responses to bereavement should be referred for administrative action by Division of Student Affairs, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and other administrative units as appropriate.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Policy Language Adapted from Purdue Student Support Services (2023)

Students will be excused with no penalty to a student's attendance and the student will be given the opportunity to make up coursework for purposes of bereavement leave. In addition to academic accommodations, graduate students on assistantship will be provided equivalent relief without penalty from their assistantship duties. This includes being granted leave even in those incidences where a student does not travel from campus.

The following parameters are established related to bereavement of a significant loss in a student's life. Note that this policy establishes minimum requirements for accommodating bereavement; in line with the university's commitment to be an inclusive community of care, instructors are expected to provide additional flexibility and extended deadlines as their course demands allow, as healing from bereavement is not a linear experience and students may require additional support throughout the semester.

Students are eligible for up to five (5) days of excused absence, over a two-week period, of the semester in which a significant loss occurs. "Significant losses" is to be interpreted broadly to include any family-of-origin or found family members with whom students are closely connected (regardless of whether they fall under traditional definitions of "immediate family"), close friends, important mentors/professional connections, and any other person whose death significantly impacts the student's ability to complete regular activities.

In addition, students may be granted additional absences to account for travel considerations, to be determined by the distance of the verified bereavement services from College Park, MD, as follows:

- Within 149 mile radius of College Park - no (0) additional excused absence days
- Between 150-299 mile radius of College Park - one (1) additional excused absence days
- Beyond 300-mile radius of College Park - three (3) additional excused absence days
- Outside the 48 contiguous United States – five (5) additional excused absence days

In unique circumstances, a bereaved student should petition for extended grief absence through the Office of the Dean of Students by meeting individually with a staff member for case evaluation.

A student should contact the Office of the Dean of Students to request that a notice of their leave be sent to instructors and appropriate Directors of Undergraduate Studies. The student will provide documentation of the death or funeral service attended to the Dean of Students. Given proper documentation, the instructor will excuse the student from class and provide the opportunity to earn equivalent credit and to demonstrate evidence of meeting the learning outcomes for missed assignments or assessments.