



Case Statement

Student enrollment, scholarship, retention and graduation are all important to the success of colleges and universities. Understanding the student population and factors that might impact their ability to succeed are of great importance to universities and society, as well-educated, skilled individuals are necessary for strong, healthy communities. Caring for and supporting students is a top priority to ensure their health and retain students through to graduation. Experts in higher education agree that academic and social integration are key elements in student retention (Tinto 1995, 1993). **Research indicates that there is a high prevalence of college students grieving a recent death, and that they are a high risk for academic and social integration difficulties.**

Numerous studies (Balk, 1997; Bemelmans, 1999; Hair, 1998; Wettemann, 1999; Wrenn, 1999) have identified that 22-30% of college undergraduates are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or friend, and 35-48% are in the first 24 months. These consistent findings are clear that a significant population of college students are grieving the recent death of a family member or friend. Other research studies have identified a correlation between grieving students and poor academic performance. One study of 227 college students grieving a death loss found that those grieving a death had consistently lower GPA's than their non-bereaved counterparts (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). In a mixed methods study conducted among 950 students at two universities, participants expressed academic difficulties including a change in study habits, lower test performance, amount of time to complete work, ability to concentrate in class, and participation in class (Cupit, Servaty-Seib, et al, 2016). This same study found a correlation between social engagement and mental health. According to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students and research indicates a link between suicidal ideation and social isolation (Servaty-Seib, Lockman, Shemwell, & Marks, 2016). Isolation is a risk factor for bereaved students (Schultz, 2007) for a number of reasons, including perceptions among bereaved students that non-bereaved peers lack understanding, and fear and misunderstanding among non-bereaved students to engage their bereaved peers (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).

Actively Moving Forward (AMF) developed naturally as a reaction to the need for academic and social integration among grieving college students. Specifically, AMF provides engagement with peers who are understanding and works with campuses to adopt policies that support the academic success of bereaved students. Qualitative research on the AMF program has been collected in the book, *We Get It*, authored by researcher Heather Servaty-Seib, and physician David Fajgenbaum. On-going and further measurement of the impact of the AMF program on the lives of grieving college students continues as does further research on how to support this high-risk population. The AMF approach uses a peer support model, as research has indicated that young adults are less likely to seek professional support or counseling (Cupit, Servaty-Seib, et al, 2016). AMF connects grieving students through peer-led social gatherings and community service to bolster the positive effects of social engagement on grieving student's mental health. David Balk, PhD and other leading researches in this area have put out a call for university engagement and sensitivity to the needs of college students (Balk 2001). As a result, AMF has developed a Grief Sensitive Campuses program that provides education to universities and assistance with developing bereavement policies that provide the extensions and flexibility bereaved students need for academic success.

Statistical Data and Key Research Findings

- 1 in 3 college undergraduates are grieving the death of a family member or friend. Specifically, 22-30% of college undergraduates are in the first 12 months of grieving the death of a family member or friend, and 35-48% are in the first 24 months (Balk 1997).
- Bereaved college students are at greater risk of decreased academic performance than their non-bereaved counterparts (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).
- Bereaved college students have a lower GPA during the semester of their death loss than non-bereaved students (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006).
- Social engagement is a key promotive factor in the positive mental health of grieving college students (Cupit, Servaty-Seib, et al, 2016).
- Grieving students feel disconnected from friends and report decreased liking and trust for others (Shultz, 2007, Catlin, 1993).
- In terms of adverse life events, death loss is the most common for undergraduates, cited more often than experiences such as parental divorce, traumatic sexual and violent acts, and academic problems (Smyth, Hockemeyer, Heron, Wonderlich, & Pennebaker, 2008).
- Grieving students tend to seek peer support, rather than professional support (Balk, 1997, Ringler & Hayden, 2000).
- Grieving students report or exhibit many problems such as insomnia, lack of motivation, problems concentrating, depression, emotional problems, and relationship concerns. (Balk, 2008; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008; Walker, 2008).
- Colleges and Universities would benefit from a bereavement policy that outlines support and help that is in place for students when they experience the death of a friend (Cupit, Servaty-Seib, et al, 2016).

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