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From Disconnection to Sentience: Creating Space for Practitioners Who Experience Student Death

Kevin L. Wright, M.A.

Content Warning: The contents of this article mention the effect of student death. It is acknowledged that death may activate a negative reaction. Reader discretion is advised.

Student crises are a common issue within higher education. When a student comes to a college campus, it is the duty and responsibility of student affairs professionals to empower them and contribute to their holistic success. Unfortunately, some students fall through the cracks and the result can conclude with a student transferring to another institution, failing their classes, dropping out of college, or in a worst-case scenario, death. Working in higher education requires hard work and heart work. There is an emotional investment in the work that is produced by scholar-practitioners. When unfortunate situations occur that result in a student's death, it is normal to feel and express emotion. Yet, there is a narrative that indicates showing emotion in the workplace is unprofessional. A common process that individuals go through when death happens are the five stages of grief. Grief involves a mixture of emotions that contribute to the experience of sentience among student affairs professionals. If student affairs scholar-practitioners are not given the opportunity to experience sentience, then the field is at risk of losing valuable talent that centers student development.

Keywords: sentience, grief, student death, employment retention, disconnection

In higher education, sometimes we lose. We lose staff and faculty due to attainment of professional promotions. We lose money due to budget cuts and financial restrictions. We lose jobs due to organizational restructuring. However, nothing is as difficult as when we lose a student by death. Student death is an occurrence that activates emotions, where some scholar-practitioners may experience anger or sadness. Some scholars argue there is no rationale to express emotions in the workplace (Sweeny, n.d.; Muchinsky, 2000). Depending on how those emotions

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are acknowledged in the workplace, disconnection and sentience can become apparent. The purpose of this article is to create a scholarly personal narrative that explains how the behavior of demonizing one's emotions, especially during times involving a student death, can cause a disconnection between a scholar-practitioner and the field of higher education itself. This article will explore the effect of student death on student affairs professionals, how intersectionality affects how a student affairs professional shows up in varying spaces, how the five stages of grief apply to our careers, and how institutions can create more opportunities for student affairs scholar-practitioners within higher education to experience sentience.

Student Death

The top three causes for college student death are accidents, suicide, and homicide (Stibich, 2019). In the three years that I have worked in higher education, I have experienced 13 student deaths. The most occurrences of student death I ever encountered was during the 2017-2018 academic year, where I lost two students who died from hiking accidents, three by suicide, and one by homicide. As an entry-level professional with only one year of full-time, post-graduate school experience, I can honestly say nothing truly prepared me for how much loss I experienced in just one academic year. Entry-level scholar-practitioners are usually closer in age to the students they work with, they are on the front lines of their functional areas, and they are at the center of high touch practices that are meant to serve students. In my experience, building rapport with students has always been a top priority. As that rapport is built, a connection is made. And once that connection is made, a relationship is created, and an emotional investment starts to manifest. Whenever I have received that email, phone call, or in-person notice of the news that no one looks forward to accepting, it has felt as if a part of me has disappeared with that student. The notion of a student no longer living contributes to an internal battle—the conflict of a (dis)connection to the student, along with a (dis)connection to the field of higher education as a whole. During the 2017-2018 academic year, in addition to experiencing six student deaths, I also experienced 10 colleagues departing from the field of higher education, who all experienced major crises that did not end well. It was a hard transition because I have known a majority of my departed colleagues since our time as undergraduate students. We talked about how we wanted to change and fix everything that was wrong with higher education and how one day we were going to be leading our own universities. This dream we all had is no longer the case. Witnessing my colleagues leave the field felt like losing activists and advocates in the middle of leading a movement. Unfortunately, the time came for them to leave completely because they no longer had a connection to the field and did not see any value in investing more of their time and talent into the system of higher education.

Intersectionality

Sentience, the ability to experience and feel, is crucial to the wellness and sense of belonging of an individual within the workplace. Each student death I have experienced activated a mixture of emotions: anger, discontentment, frustration, sadness, loneliness, and confusion. However, those emotions could not be openly expressed because they were not welcomed or expected, partly because of identity and positionality. Identity informs how we show up in varying spaces, and there are privileges to certain identities as to how a person can or cannot show up; it is an intersectional experience. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) is a lawyer and critical race theory scholar who coined the term “intersectionality” to address the systemic barriers that affect a person based on the identities they hold. Additionally, Crenshaw (1990) sought to address how at any moment there are multiple forms of privilege and/or oppression acting on a person and how those systems interact with one another. In reference to intersectionality, it is crucial to recognize how emotions are or are not expressed due to my race, positionality, and gender. Intersectionality also raises the question of who specifically has the access and privilege to express emotions in the workplace while considering narrow-minded assumptions and perceptions of who personifies student affairs professionals.

As a Black cisgender male, who served in a position of authority, there were social, organizational, and departmental expectations for me to be calm, well-spoken, and carry myself at all times with cordial demeanor. Overall, sentience was an experience that was never granted to me because it was more important for me, and colleagues with similar identities, to navigate spaces by perpetuating behaviors rooted in whiteness. When a student dies, being calm, well-spoken, or cordial may not be realistic. Instead, it is rather common to go through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We deny the student is no longer with us. We become angered by their loss and think about everything that led to their passing. We bargain with ourselves and the world and think about what could have gone better or differently. Eventually, we find ourselves in a depressive state because we realize nothing can change what has already happened. Lastly, we come to terms with our truth and reality, make amends with the world, accept what has been done, and then somehow move on.

Five Stages of Grief

In student affairs, when we are not granted the opportunity to navigate through the five stages of grief when a student passes away, we may be susceptible to navigating through the five stages of grief regarding our careers. The last student I lost by death was caused by suicide. When I first received the news, I had just gotten off a plane after a weekend retreat. I found myself standing in the airport terminal, crying, feeling lost, and hoped that it was all just a bad dream. Kübler-Ross &

Kessler (2009) explains that the first stage of denial is where “We go numb. We wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, why we should go on” (p. 1). Anytime I have experienced a major crisis in my career, usually the first thing I have done is question and deny the entire situation. When I have lost a student, I have denied their death, and would do anything to bring them back. I have also denied the institutional, organizational, and departmental politics, while trying to regain my grounding, remind myself of the values I hold, and maintain my connection to higher education. As I was in this stage of numbness and confusion, I would receive messages from colleagues informing me of their disconnection to higher education, along with their departure from the system of education. Sometimes, the thought of leaving the field of student affairs has gone through my head, and I have wondered myself whether I am good enough to continue. The manifestation of imposter syndrome seeping into the confines of my inner thoughts is a major hurdle to overcome when evaluating my sense of (dis)connection, especially considering losing part of my connection to a student.

This sense of doubt can lead to frustration, and sometimes anger. As previously mentioned, the work that is produced in higher education is hard work and heart work which means the emotional investment that is made can trigger a range of emotions. With anger specifically, it can be difficult to pinpoint the root cause. Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2009) define the second stage of anger as multifaceted because “anger has no limits. It can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself and your loved one who died, but also to God” (p. 2). When I lost my very first student, I found myself angry at everyone that contributed to my career in higher education. I was angry at my colleagues, mentors, cohort mates, and faculty members. I felt unprepared and was angry at the fact that no one ever talked to me about how to handle this situation as an aspiring campus administrator. Through my experience, the feeling of anger has been sporadic because the anger has stemmed from multiple sources, which has created a point of contention between myself and the field of higher education. The relationship itself is convoluted; to be in a Black body and navigate through a system that was not initially designed to benefit me, nor anyone of my race, while trying to create opportunities for those that enter higher education after me while they are also carrying their historically marginalized identities is a difficult task. A task that gives me the perception, that if I stop, then certain students no longer have an advocate. This situation causes anger not only with the system of higher education, but also with myself.

In light of this anger, I have found myself trying to look for a silver lining. In the third stage of grief, bargaining, Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2009) indicate that “We become lost in a maze of ‘If only...’ or ‘What if...’ statements” (p. 2). Through my observations of my colleagues and myself, I have noticed that these statements never stop. Statements like “if only I could have done something more,” would

roam through my head due to my feelings of being a failure. I would ask myself questions like “what if the student did not feel supported?” because I thought my actions were not good enough to save that student. Lastly, I would ponder on statements like “maybe things will get better if I work at another institution,” because I would try to convince myself that a change in scenery would make things better. Regardless of what the statements are, all they do is contribute to a deep hole of sadness and even more confusion. Because no institution is perfect, people find themselves bargaining on a consistent basis, which also contributes to the level of their (dis)connection to higher education.

Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2009) note that depression, the fourth stage of grief, is where “empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined” (p. 2). Losing 13 students so far has not been easy. Each time when I had to overcome my emotions, I thought I was okay, but the truth is that I was doing nothing but suppressing my emotions because of a self-proclaimed savior complex; I did everything in my power to solve everyone else’s problems, which would take time away for me to solve my own problems. I take pride in my ability to solve problems, and when students needed me, I could always be there to save the day and make their time in college easier and more enjoyable. However, anytime I have lost a student, I found myself asking why I was not able to save them. Recently, I found the strength and courage to access counseling and mental health services. While my experiences were giving me opportunities to develop resiliency, they were also navigating me toward a diagnosis of mild depression. At least in the United States, there is a stigma that expressing emotions in the workplace or experiencing depression is a sign of being weak-willed or living an immoral lifestyle (Sweeny, n.d.; Nersessova et al., 2019). When navigating through grief, it is important to understand that the temporary depressive stage is part of that sense of healing and redefining of (dis)connection. My experiences have taught me that it is difficult to help a wounded healer. Higher education as a system needs to reframe the functionality and support offered to staff and faculty as much as the institution invests into supporting its students. My experiences have shifted certain boundaries I hold, and I more often communicate to others how my holistic wellness and professional livelihood are both interconnected, and interdependent of each other. I strive to give higher education the best of me, not what is left of me, and in order to continue doing that, there needs to be systematic initiatives in place that will not result in the demonization of expressing emotion.

Acceptance, the last stage of grief, usually has some misconceptions because it implies that people are okay with what has transpired. When a major crisis happens, whether it is within higher education or not, in the aftermath, it does not mean we become okay. Instead, “We learn to live with it. It is the new norm with which we must learn to live” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2009, p. 2). When losing a student, I have been fortunate to experience acceptance each time. My students

are no longer with me in a physical form, but I understand my personal beliefs help me maintain a connection to them spiritually. Regarding higher education, my experiences have taught me that either I accept what has happened and find an alternative method to continue working within the system (redefining connection), or I accept that I can no longer navigate through the system and leave altogether (solidifying the disconnection). Marshall et al. (2016) note that roughly 50-60% of individuals who work in higher education leave the field within their first five years. Higher education is losing valuable talent, and its students are the direct recipients of that effect. The system is past due in regard to creating spaces to allow, acknowledge, and honor individual sentience.

Disconnection to Sentience

In higher education, we seek to embrace students holistically. We intentionally create opportunities to ensure students feel valued and empowered. Imagine how powerful that notion would be if applied to staff and faculty. As much as higher education embraces the whole student, it also needs to embrace the whole individual that is doing the work to serve and empower students. Other factors that contribute to a scholar-practitioner's potential departure from the field consist of "excessive hours and burnout, non-competitive salaries, attractive career alternatives, limited opportunities for growth and advancement, internal and external conflicts between work and one's personal life, and poor supervision" (Marshall et al., 2016, p. 152). These factors alone can create a lot of unneeded stress and having to deal with all of that on top of the loss of a student warrants no surprise when someone leaves the field. If student affairs professionals are not allowed to express or experience what they are feeling, then those emotions are bottled up, internalized, and create additional thoughts of disconnectedness. Student affairs professionals develop a sense that the system does not care about them and try to deny it. This sense of denial and perception of carelessness creates anger and frustration. These professionals hope they can bargain and change their surroundings by moving to a different functional area or a different institution because things will be different, and therefore, will be better. If those expectations do not become a reality, a depressive state may manifest. As student affairs professionals navigate through that depression, they come to terms with the fact that they are either strong enough to continue working in higher education, or they are strong enough to let it go completely and accept it. Sentience should be the standard, not the expectation. Providing opportunities for people to truly experience the effect of their work, regardless if the outcome is positive or negative, is important because it determines their sense of connection or disconnection to the system of higher education.

As previously mentioned, I did not find myself prepared properly to handle the effects of a student death. My recommendations for higher education center around

the importance of preparation, training, and support. One recommendation is for student affairs and higher education masters and doctoral programs to create sustainable curriculum that provides scholarly insight on the effect of student death when working in higher education. An additional recommendation is for current campus administrators, professional associations, and higher education consultants to create trainings that provide a historical, holistic, and applicable understanding of equitable and developing practices when a student death occurs. Lastly, it is important for institutions to create systems of support that can accommodate the needs of staff and faculty who are affected by the loss of a student. While mental health services are important, institutions need to create additional systems of support that are informed by inclusive institutional policy to protect faculty and staff when they are navigating through the grieving process, instead of being excessively referred to the campus counseling office.

Conclusion

My experiences are not monolithic, and I acknowledge there are many other factors that contribute to disconnection and sentience that were not discussed. Per usual, there is much work to be done, and it will require new processes and practices. In higher education, spaces for sentience need to be created because sentience can shift the field away from a problematic culture that perpetuates the norm of emotions being unprofessional. As professional associations and institutions of higher education continue to review and evaluate rising practices and newly developed competencies, engagement about the systemic limitations and institutional barriers that deter scholar-practitioners from sentiential experiences is required. These conversations will not only be helpful to have, but they will also create opportunities for individuals to view the system of higher education as more than just a job or career. By experiencing and truly feeling the effects of what occurs in higher education, both good and bad, we are placing each other in a place where expression is encouraged so the necessary support can be given.

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