



COST OF CARING IN STUDENT AFFAIRS: WHEN A PROFESSIONAL LOSS BECOMES PERSONAL

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On Friday, September 30th, I (Stephanie Russell Krebs) opened Facebook after not logging in for a few days and was brought to my knees when I saw a post that a dear colleague and friend, Dr. Adam Peck, Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs at Illinois State University, had unexpectedly passed away in a tragic accident on campus. Adam and I served together on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Campus Activities Scholarship and Practice*. The announcement of Adam's passing immediately transported me back eight years to a time when I served as Senior Student Affairs Officer at The University of Tampa— when the campus lost a beloved staff member quickly and unexpectedly. I was charged with leading my team through that tragedy while also supporting our students, all while personally grieving myself. That experience was one of the most challenging and meaningful experiences I have navigated as a Senior Student Affairs Officer because the work and the emotions spanned across my professional and personal life.

Many student affairs professionals have experienced grief spanning across our personal and professional lives. Adam's passing prompted the authors of this article to share stories of similar staff losses to provide insight into navigating similar tragedies. As student affairs professionals, we often serve on the "front lines" when bad things happen. These roles are mentally exhausting to take on, even when you are not in relationship with those impacted. So, when you are in relationship with the loss, the complexity at the intersection of managing our grief while helping others process their own can seem overwhelming.

This article will explore two different cases of staff deaths, from the perspective of the Senior Student Officer, at two unique institutions, and how the student affairs staff managed their own grief processes while leading and supporting their teams. A theoretical framework of secondary traumatic stress, grief, and healing will be woven throughout the article, with special attention focused on the healing process and reflections for practice. All involved in this article respected Dr. Adam Peck as the consummate scholar/practitioner. We believe he would enjoy knowing that his passing was the inspiration for this article aimed at providing tools for other student affairs staff members navigating loss, love, and forward movement.

Theoretical Framework

Like other support service professionals, student affairs professionals have been trained to be helpers. Daily, staff employ a myriad of listening skills, triage interventions, refer students, and report and document student behavior. These activities create an environment with the potential for these professionals to be exposed to microtraumas. Microtraumas can come in the form of responding to a student assault, identifying resources to assist an unhoused student, or grieving a staff death. Here, our goal is to center student affairs professionals' experiences using a framework focused on secondary stress.

The nature of secondary traumatic stress can have a profound emotional impact on student affairs professionals, given how interconnected their work and personal lives may be. Moreover, they perhaps rationalize such stress caused by these interconnections as the “cost of caring.” And the cost is often steep: experiencing rapid heart rate, poor concentration, worry, panic, anger, withdrawal, hyper-vigilance, or changes to interpersonal relationships (Schwitzer, 2004). To conceptualize exposure to something as traumatic as losing a colleague from the professional’s perspective begins with a basic understanding of secondary traumatic stress.

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a type of emotional distress that results when an individual learns about (whether through hearing or reading) firsthand traumatic experiences experienced by someone else (Saakvitne et al., 1998). Past research suggests STS can negatively impact work performance (Maslach & Florian, 1988) and often emerges as a consequence of continued exposure to the trauma experienced by others. If unchecked, STS can permanently change someone’s perceptions of the world (Cunningham, 2004). Unfortunately, research suggests student affairs professionals, due to their responsibilities in providing care to those they serve, are often at greater risk of being exposed to and adversely affected by secondary traumatic stress (Hodge, 2016).

Throughout this article, we will provide examples to illustrate how secondary traumatic stress can be experienced by student affairs professionals whose work and personal lives sometimes blur. We hope to demonstrate that student affairs professionals cannot simply “turn off” their secondary experiences of trauma once they leave their professional roles. Our goal is to encourage self-awareness in these professionals while acknowledging the potential for exposure, helping individuals identify their emotions and those of others.

Case Study 1

Kathy Cavins-Tull, Vice President for Student Affairs, Texas Christian University

It was a Sunday morning, and many of my TCU colleagues and I were attending the annual NASPA conference that year held in Los Angeles. At a meeting of Senior Student Affairs Officers, I heard from a colleague, “There’s been an accident. Jamie is in the hospital.” Jamie Dulle served as an Assistant Dean at TCU, and because our Deans go to the hospital when students are in need, I asked for the names of the students involved in whatever incident caused the hospital trip. “It’s Jamie, and it doesn’t look good,” the officer responded. Jamie had been hit by a drunk driver while waiting at a stoplight and was in critical condition at a local trauma hospital. The world stood still. In a matter of hours, I returned to Fort Worth. Two days later, Jamie was pronounced dead, and six days after that, our team was planning a celebration of life and meeting with students in her caseload.

In student affairs, we often serve as front-line problem solvers; the professionals who respond to community crises. We know how to prioritize health and safety, when to notify others, and how to deliver emotional support. But what happens when the crisis we are responsible for managing is our own? Like many in this field who take jobs away from where they grew up and therefore live away from family and longtime social support, Jamie relied on a strong network of colleagues who were also friends. Her death was personal to them, myself included. We also knew that our grief was shared with the students Jamie helped at the most vulnerable times in their college lives. We used the resources provided by our Human Resources colleagues for our own grief and offered campus resources to students. We created a team of people who responded to the needs of her family. Our Dean of Students’ team worked individually with Jamie’s student caseload to respond to their specific needs and to ensure that they would get continuity of care. We established a team to plan a celebration of Jamie’s life open to all students, faculty, and staff.

Losing a colleague and friend can become one of the most challenging and defining moments in the life of our organization. I firmly believe few organizations could respond as well as our Student Affairs organization did in the midst of this tragedy. For that, I am thankful.

Case Study 2

Stephanie Russell Krebs, Vice President for Student Affairs and Strategic Initiatives, The University of Tampa

Eight years ago, The University of Tampa lost a force of nature. Krystal Schofield, Associate Dean, lost an extremely short battle with breast cancer after a 15-year career at The University of Tampa. The battle was so short that most university community members did not even know she was ill. Typically, as a student affairs professional, I jump into “emergency crisis management mode” when a student tragedy occurs. In this case, I felt frozen, even while serving as the senior student affairs officer. I recall driving to work the day after she passed, surprising myself by pulling into a grocery store parking lot. I turned off the car, laid my head on the steering wheel, and cried, feeling like I could not catch my breath. I physically could not re-start start my car, neither to drive back home nor to work. Instead, I called a trusted colleague and friend, and I remember saying, “I don’t know if I can go back to work and feel the void.” My colleague gave me a moment before imparting some wisdom. She affirmed my emotions and encouraged me to take it one step at a time. She reminded me that we had a community that was also grieving, and that we could, and would, help each other.

Her words helped me become unstuck from that steering wheel. The days ahead were a blur. We worked with our Human Resources colleagues to share grief resources with our staff. At the same time, our counseling center, which was part of our student affairs community, provided support to our students. The pressure to continue our typical services and office continuity, recognizing that our entire university community was not impacted, was a challenge, as we felt that everyone should be grieving Krystal’s passing.

As time progressed, we moved into a legacy-building aspect of the healing process. We coordinated an immediate and personal off-campus memorial in partnership with Krystal’s family, and then an institution-level on-campus celebration for the campus community after some time had passed. We then honored Krystal’s life by creating a scholarship in her memory and renaming our division-wide core value awards in her name. After the initial crisis management work concluded and the celebrations occurred, the ongoing impact has continued to permeate campus culture several years later.

Themes for Practice

It is not uncommon to feel that campus life must go on unabated, largely mirroring life before the tragedy and trauma. Student affairs professionals are often keenly aware of the pressure to restore order and return to business. However, the grieving process that emerges in some staff may directly conflict with these goals. Some student affairs professionals may need more time, while others would rather not engage in the loss. Similarly, some staff may want to ensure someone’s memory is institutionally enshrined, while others may hope to move on to regain a sense of normalcy. All of these responses are valid, so it is paramount for campus leadership to wrestle with how to manage the loss and any temporary or permanent change to campus operations. Whatever the decisions, they should not come at the risk of the mental health of staff.

Within both case studies, four themes emerge that can be used in practice to understand the context of trauma further: 1) Personal Care Through Trauma; 2) Supporting Students Through Shared Grief; 3) Honoring Legacy; 4) Community as a Support Network. Each theme will be discussed, and recommendations for practice will be embedded.

Tools for Personal Care Through Trauma

In student affairs, we are aware of the impact of compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion as it relates to working with students on our campuses. However, little is known about how student affairs professionals manage traumatic exposure responses. The stress associated with exposure to trauma affects how one’s world looks and feels different as a result of engaging in day-to-day work (Lipsky & Burk, 2009, as cited in Sansbury, Graves, & Scott, 2015). Student affairs professionals often focus on supporting our students through traumatic experiences and forget that these factors affect ourselves.

Sansbury, Graves & Scott (2015) outline practical guidelines for mental health clinicians to manage traumatic stress responses that can apply to our field. The first step is to *know thyself*, which focuses on understanding how your body (mental and physical) responds to the trauma. *Committing to addressing the stress* is the second step, where professionals need to recognize that the trauma affects how they interact with others, and as a result, how they do their jobs. Recognizing how your interactions have changed because of the trauma offers the opportunity to *make a*

personal plan of action. The final step then becomes *acting on the plan*, which requires establishing a support system within the organization to “gently hold each person accountable to healthy coping and self-care” (p. 118).

Supporting Students Through Shared Grief

The role of many student affairs professionals focuses on helping students achieve success in their environments. When trauma is experienced in a deeply personal way by those responsible for providing support and help themselves, the campus response should be multifaceted; it should address not only students who are impacted but also the campus personnel left grieving. Moreover, it is essential to remember that the loss of a community member does not affect everyone equally. Initial consideration and assessment of the organization’s most vulnerable need to be identified (Sansbury, Graves & Scott, 2015). Additionally, it is important to help the staff identify where possible conflicts of interest in addressing the trauma may exist.

The loss of a colleague on campus also requires that that individual’s work be redistributed, especially in the short term, including how that individual may have informally served as a mentor to students and staff. Once an assessment of those most vulnerable has been identified and where conflicts of interest may exist, the difficult task of advancing the work begins. That work likely includes reaching out to students and staff who worked closely with the colleague who passed to express empathy and offer initial options for support. It is important to not treat this process simply as a logistical task to reassign duties, but rather one with emotional components, with the goal to keep doing the significant work of supporting the success of the students and staff the lost colleague cared so much about.

Honoring the Staff Member’s Legacy as a Healing Process

When a beloved staff member passes, after the initial shock subsides, a tendency exists “to get back to normal life” (Levine, 2011, p.3). Such a tendency may involve creating a plan for office continuity, reassigning the colleague’s workload, and constructing a long- and short-term plan for refilling their role. When these steps rush or even ignore the healing process, staff may avoid and deflect their feelings, which can suppress the need to grieve and emotionally react (Schwitzer, 2002). Instead, striving for a return to normalcy through a gradual approach can provide an opportunity to begin a return to a normal routine while incorporating the loss in emotionally meaningful ways, which frames the trauma as an opportunity for institutional learning (Schwitzer, 2008).

Life coach, therapist, and author Shannon Adler states, “A legacy is etched into the minds of others by the stories they share about you (goodreads.com, 2022).” Making meaning of a tragedy and creating an approach to amplify the legacy left by the deceased exists at the heart of the healing process. Below, we offer the following suggestions for ways student affairs professionals can share stories of their loved one and build their legacy while supporting the healing process.

1. Immediately when a staff member passes, it is important to identify one staff member to serve as the liaison with the family. The family may be planning a memorial, and it is important to know if they would like involvement from their loved one’s colleagues. The liaison can share with the university community information and the family’s wishes. While the loss to colleagues can be profound, it is important to remember that the loss the family feels supersedes work relationships. The wishes of the family must come first.
2. An on-campus celebration honoring the lost staff member can serve as a way for staff and students to be part of the healing process. Gathering a small group of those closest to the loved one to plan an event provides an opportunity for those people most affected by the loss to share their stories, laugh and cry together, and can lessen the actual cost of caring that some experience, most notably the tendency to withdrawal and change the structure of their relationships (Schwitzer, 2004).
3. Naming an award, scholarship, or program to honor the deceased can be a way to keep their legacy alive after the memorials and celebrations have ended. Naming can serve as a cathartic process that engages others in the process of determining what would be most fitting, which often contributes to the healing process.
4. Creating an annual tradition to honor the deceased can serve to build legacy. The tradition should be connected to an area of passion for the deceased. For example, an annual fun run might be appropriate if

the staff member was a runner. If the staff member was an avid reader, an annual book club in their honor would be fitting. The key is engaging staff that are still grieving in the process to select and initially execute the annual tradition. Business strategist Peter Strople said, “Legacy is not leaving something for people. It’s leaving something in people” (High, 2020). In reference to the impact of those mentioned above, a virtual book club is being named after Dr. Adam Peck, given his interests, and The University of Tampa announces the “Krystal Schofield Outstanding Contribution Awards” at a ceremony every January.

Community as a Support Network

For many Student Affairs professionals, responding to the needs of others is not only our responsibility; it serves as our superpower. Our organizations attract individuals who want to work in supportive and inclusive communities, and when a crisis occurs, the care and compassion we extend reflect our core values. When a crisis is shared by the community and our grief is both personal and collective, relying on the support of others is essential for a few reasons:

1. Colleges and universities have built-in support resources. From licensed counselors to chaplains or spiritual life professionals, employee assistance programming to communication professionals, and even instructional technology and police resources (depending on the nature of the death), an abundance of resources are available within the campus community.
2. For many, doing something to contribute to a community’s healing after the death of a colleague helps individuals feel connected and purposeful in their grief.
3. There is no standard process for grief; people will grieve at their own pace and in their own individual way. Still, operations within a university must continue, and serving students must remain a priority. Allowing others to take on some additional responsibilities in the short term can aid in providing space for those who need it.
4. Crisis and grief create trauma individually and collectively, but connecting with others going through similar experiences can be a powerful healer. Be careful not to exclude those who may be part of the larger collective affected by the trauma.

One of the greatest assets in our professional field is the community in which we do our work. Especially in times of shared crisis and grief, strength can be discovered within the community and network of those who know this work.

Implications

Across student affairs, administrators hold a wide range of experience and training in traumatic events. While staff in some areas may be directly trained in handling traumatic situations with students (such as residential life and counseling), others may have received no training nor had practical experiences with it during their careers. Some institutions may grind to a standstill over a unique and tragic student death. In contrast, a student could pass away on a different campus, and most of the general population might know nothing about it. A wide variety of comfort levels exist, based on many factors, from formalized training to institutional history and culture.

Dealing with the loss of a colleague in student affairs can be an extreme disruption to our personal and professional work because we do not often prepare for it as a community. Some reasons may stem from clichés, such as “What happened at that institution couldn’t happen to us” or “We are mindful of helping others but don’t know how to take care of ourselves.” The harsh reality is that the time to prepare for a crisis is not when it is happening, but before it ever happens, with the hope that it will never happen.

Therefore, as a field, we need to prepare a more formalized approach to the well-being of our staff members affected by a collective trauma affecting their professional and personal lives. The twenty-first century has brought very public tragedies to our campus, like 9/11, campus shootings, natural disasters, a rise in hate speech, polarizing politics and political rhetoric, violence against students from minoritized and marginalized identities, and COVID-19 (among countless other issues). Student Affairs administrators are often responsible for helping their students through all of these tragic events. Yet, it often feels as if the expectation is that they need to handle these events as if they themselves are not impacted by these occurrences.

We strongly advocate that administrators examine their crisis planning, self-care policies, and response protocols at all institutional levels. It is essential to look at how our systems operate and whether redundancies for emergencies exist, examining how information is shared and who has access to it. For example, on many campuses, staff can identify that handful of individuals who “know how things run,” where their records exist only in their heads, and in their absence, efficient work grinds to a halt.

Just as importantly, administrators need to create plans and opportunities to provide care and encourage self-care for employees struggling with their own stress and trauma. We need to move past telling someone to simply “take some time off” to actually helping them take that time off productively, not doing so simply to return to the variety of issues, problems, and tasks they left. We need to be responsible for the health of our staff, not just in words, but in action.

Final Thought

Depending on the size of the campus, it is likely rare that a death of a student affairs staff member occurs, and when it does, it can be devastating. We must remember to talk about it, address it, and help ourselves and others heal. As a profession, we don’t often conduct research on the impact of death on an institution. Yet opportunities exist in order to help others in the profession when something tragic occurs. Losing outstanding colleagues such as Adam, Jamie, Krystal, and others like them has been devastating, but in the spirit of who those people were as educators, learning from their passings represents a continuation of their legacies.

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