Let's Talk about Death: An Open Forum for Challenging and Changing URI’s Response to Student Bereavement

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Let’s Talk About Death: 
An Open Forum for Challenging and Changing URI’s Response to Student Bereavement

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INTRODUCTION

I lost my father, who was my best friend and main support person, in March 2020 and felt a discord and inconsistency in how my grief was handled by the university. This project is designed to understand how the University of Rhode Island currently supports students after they have experienced a death loss and determine ways we can improve student support moving forward.

METHODS

This project’s praxes include:
• A faculty survey on current supports
  • 9-question IRB exempt survey for undergraduate research sent to all faculty members, via department chairs and administrators at URI over a 3-week period.
  • Study of other universities’ student bereavement policies
  • I studied 10 different universities focusing on the policy itself, documents required, length of excused absences, who counted, travel considerations, process of submission, and any outstanding information.
  • Facilitation of a forum with faculty, staff, and administrators
  • A 2-hour Zoom forum discussion providing results of the survey, other universities’ policies, and where the future of this project could go. I incorporated discussion questions, encouraged people to ask questions throughout, and allowed others to verbalize their ideas on the future of this project.

RESULTS

Faculty survey on current support
• 134 responses from 6/8 colleges
• The amount of response demonstrated faculty members cared about this topic.
• There is an inconsistency in how faculty are responding to students and how students are informing their faculty of their loss.
• Faculty members want more guidance on how to best support their students, academically and mentally.

FIGURE 1: How do you usually learn that a student has lost a loved one?

Figure 1: Left to Right: Email, In person/Virtual conversation, Missing Assignments/ Late Work, Continual Absences, Notification from student’s advisor/administrator, Other.

FIGURE 2: Which of the following supports do you offer students when they experience a loss?

Figure 2: Left to Right. Provide extra time on an assignment, Allow them to omit triggering material/assignments, Check in with them through emails or 1:1 meetings, Provide them resources ie Counseling Center, Excused absences, Reschedule quizzes/ exams, I do not provide extra support for these students, Other.

DISCUSSION

39 faculty, staff, and administrators attended my Zoom forum discussion to review the information presented on this poster and the importance of needed improvements in URI’s response to grieving students. We concluded by generating ideas for the futurity of this project.

We talked about the possibility of creating a standard bereavement policy for the university, creating a committee to talk about the current challenges students face who have experienced a death loss, and emphasizing that the conversation should not end.

A 6 question post-forum survey was sent out to the participants to which 25 responded. The response for the forum was overwhelmingly positive, as seen in Figure 3. This project was designed to initiate the conversation and the response indicates that a change will occur.

LITERATURE CITED


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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