



# The Invisible Workload of Grief: Student Bereavement Administrative Burdens

## Elizabeth Wang

### I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sudden parental death can destabilize a college student's life in two ways at once: emotionally and logistically. While universities often emphasize counseling and emotional support, bereaved students also face an immediate surge of academic and administrative tasks. These include managing complex processes like financial aid changes, tuition deadlines, housing adjustments, and required documentation alongside the responsibilities of being a student. This brief argues that the "invisible workload of grief" is a predictable administrative burden that schools can reduce through improved policy design. When support depends on student self-advocacy and office-by-office exceptions, students with fewer resources or limited time are more likely to fall behind, withdraw, or take on avoidable financial penalties. This paper proposes a campus-level bereavement response framework that creates a single, clear point of contact for coordination, standardizes short-term academic flexibility, and streamlines documentations and financial aid pathways during the most difficult part of grief.

### II. OVERVIEW

College students experiencing sudden parental death often must continue functioning within systems that assume stable time, attention, and paperwork capacity. In reality, grief commonly

affects concentration, sleep, and the ability to manage deadlines. At the same time, students may need to take on new responsibilities at home, travel for funeral arrangements, and handle family financial disruption. Universities and financial aid systems often require students to "prove" crises through documentation, re-explain their situation repeatedly, and meet deadlines even when they're in acute stress. This creates a compounding effect. The more overwhelmed a student is, the more they are penalized by processes that demand fast and accurate compliance. This brief focuses on the administrative and academic burdens that follow sudden parental death and proposes reforms that reduce friction without lowering academic standards.

#### *A. Relevance*

This is a student success issue, an equity issue, and an institutional efficiency issue. Students who lose a parent suddenly may face rapid income changes, disrupted housing stability, and new caregiving roles. When universities lack clear bereavement pathways, students often rely on informal negotiations with individual instructors and trial-and-error navigation across offices. Because grief-related crises are time sensitive, delays can lead to missed withdrawals, late fees, failed courses, financial aid interruptions, or loss of scholarships. A standardized and humane response protects academics while reducing staff time spent handling repeated exceptions.

### III. HISTORY

#### *A. Current Stances*

Current approaches typically fall into three categories. Informal faculty discretion with extensions and attendance flexibility varies widely by instructor; case management or “student of concern” support is helpful when available but not always designed for bereavement-specific coordination across offices; and documentation-driven administrative pathways with financial aid, withdrawal/grade appeals, and housing changes can actually unintentionally increase grief-stricken students’ burdens during crisis.

### IV. POLICY PROBLEM

#### *A. Stakeholders*

Bereaved students are primary stakeholders, especially those who are first-generation, low-income, international, or dependent on scholarships/aid. Faculty and teaching staff also play a role in responsibility for academic flexibility decisions, which typically come without standardized guidance. Academic advising and student success offices are the key supporters who can prevent withdrawals and academic probation. The financial aid offices handle professional judgments, verification, emergency aid, and scholarship compliance. The registrar and bursar enforce deadlines, withdrawals, tuition liabilities, grade changes, and academic standing rules. Housing and campus services manage contract changes and meal plans during sudden life disruptions. University offices balance student retention and policy consistency.

#### *B. Risks of Indifference*

If the university treats bereavement as only a mental health issue and ignores administrative friction, students face harms that could be avoided. These harms include higher risk of failed courses, probation, or withdrawal; increased debt due to missed withdrawal windows and tuition liability; losing scholarships or aid due to credit-hour requirements; long-term delays in graduation and reduced earning potential; and re-traumatization from repeatedly disclosing personal loss and memories to multiple offices. For universities, this indifference also creates costs: more appeals, more exceptions handled manually, increased staff workload, and lower student retention.

#### *C. Nonpartisan Reasoning*

This issue should matter across political perspectives because it connects to:

- 1) **Efficiency:** Universities function better when crisis pathways are clear and coordinated.
- 2) **Equal access:** Systems that require high self-advocacy disproportionately harm students with fewer resources and less-privileged backgrounds.
- 3) **Workforce and economic outcomes:** Supporting students through crisis improves retention and graduation, strengthening the future workforce.
- 4) **Institutional accountability:** Clear policies reduce inconsistency, complaints, and reputational risk.

### V. TRIED POLICY

Many campuses rely on informal accommodations like instructor discretion, individual academic appeals, and referrals to counseling. Some universities offer short bereavement absence guidelines, but these are often limited, unclear, or unevenly applied across departments. Financial aid offices can use a professional judgment to adjust aid eligibility, but the process can be slow and documentation-heavy, especially when families are overwhelmed. These approaches help some students, but they often fail to solve the main problem. There's a lack of a coordinated, low-friction pathway that reduces the number of tasks a bereaved student must complete during the most difficult time of grief.

## VI. POLICY OPTIONS

### **Bereavement “Single Point of Contact” Case Manager**

At each institution, assign a dedicated case manager for bereavement that coordinates across advising, financial aid, the registrar, and faculty. The student submits one intake form and chooses what information can be shared.

### **Standardized Short-Term Academic Flexibility**

Establish a campus-wide bereavement accommodation policy that guarantees a defined number of excused absences, automatic short-term assignment extensions, flexible exam rescheduling, and clear pathways for incomplete grades without academic penalty. This reduces variability across instructors and removes the need for students to negotiate individually. It promotes fairness and consistency, protects academic

standards while acknowledging crisis, and reduces faculty uncertainty. It requires faculty buy-in and must balance flexibility with course learning outcomes.

### **Temporary Administrative Freeze Window**

Implement a 30–45 administrative grace period following documented parental death during which late fees are paused, withdrawal penalties are reduced, financial aid verification deadlines are extended, and housing contract penalties are temporarily suspended. This model acknowledges that grief disrupts executive functioning and administrative capacity. It prevents avoidable financial penalties, reduces long-term debt accumulation, and increases fairness for low-income students. It requires coordination between registrar, bursar, and aid offices and must include safeguards against misuse.

### **Proactive Financial Aid Fast-Track Review**

Create an expedited professional judgment review process specifically for parental death cases, with simplified documentation requirements and temporary emergency grants while aid adjustments are processed. It addresses immediate financial instability, reduces scholarship loss due to credit-hour disruptions, and supports retention and degree completion. However, it requires streamlined documentation standards, and it's dependent on institutional funding capacity.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

Sudden parental death is not a rare or unpredictable event. It's a foreseeable life disruption that intersects with institutional

systems designed for administrative consistency rather than crisis responsiveness. When universities treat bereavement solely as a mental health issue, they overlook the structural burden placed on students navigating paperwork, deadlines, and financial uncertainty during acute grief. The invisible workload of grief is not an emotional weakness; it is an administrative design flaw. Systems that require high levels of self-advocacy disproportionately disadvantage students who are already under stress, particular first-generation, low-income, and international students. A coordinated bereavement framework that includes a single point of contact, standardized academic flexibility, temporary administrative grace periods, and expedited financial aid review would reduce friction without lowering academic expectations. These reforms are about reducing unnecessary bureaucratic harm. By redesigning policies to account for predictable human crises, institutions strengthen student retention, protect equity, and align administrative systems with their stated mission of student success.

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