

Experiences of Grief & Resilience in College

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BACKGROUND

- **Bereaved College Students**
 - Often under-studied and under-resourced (Cooley et al., 2013).
 - Approximately 60% of college students experience the loss of an important person in their life during college (Cox et al., 2015).
 - Face challenges in physical, psychological, social, and cognitive domains that impact academic outcomes (Plocha et al., 2022).
 - Experience social detachment, mental/physical health concerns, and complicated grief (Cousins et al., 2017).
 - Less likely to graduate compared to non-bereaved peers (Servaty-Seib & Chye, 2019).
- **Common Supports & Resources**
 - Individualized counseling is the most common support offered (Liew & Servaty-Seib, 2020).
 - Many counseling staff lack expertise in grief, and services are underutilized (Varga et al., 2021).
 - Only 10-18% of bereaved students seek counseling in the first year after loss (Cox et al., 2015; Varga et al., 2021).
 - Grieving students often seek support from peers and family instead of counseling services (Cousins et al., 2017).
- **Resilience in Bereaved Students**
 - Most students exhibit resilience and positive adaptations over time (Plocha et al., 2022).
 - Resilience is linked to fewer symptoms of depression and re-engagement in key developmental aspects of adulthood (Plocha et al., 2022).
- **Gap in Current Research**
 - Most bereavement research focuses on students using counseling services, which are a minority of bereaved students.
 - Need to understand how students who are not receiving counseling services conceptualize resilience.

SPECIFIC AIMS

- The aim of this project was to explore the experiences of bereaved college students not connected to counseling services, including:
 - Describing the age-salient behaviors, cognitions, and emotions that bereaved college students who are not utilizing counseling services associate with resilience and non-resilience
 - Identifying barriers to or reasons for a lack of engagement with formalized campus counseling services
 - Exploring the experience of bereavement in the undergraduate student population

METHODS

Study Design & Aim

- Mixed-methods study designed to build on Plocha et al. (2022) to explore bereavement and resilience in undergraduate students

Instrument

- Developed using combination of questions from Plocha et al. (2022), Varga et al. (2021), Liew & Servaty-Seib (2019), Balk (2008), and researcher-developed items

- Included the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 25 (CD-RISC-25) as a standardized instrument

- Pilot-tested with the population of interest prior to launch

Inclusion Criteria

- (1) Current undergraduate students at Binghamton University; (2) 18+; (3) Experienced the loss of someone significant to them since they began attending University; (4) Consented to participate in the study

Procedures

- Participation completely voluntary and responses anonymous
- Qualtrics Survey:
 - **First survey:** Data collection instrument
 - **Second survey:** Collected contact information for raffle entry and interest in future study

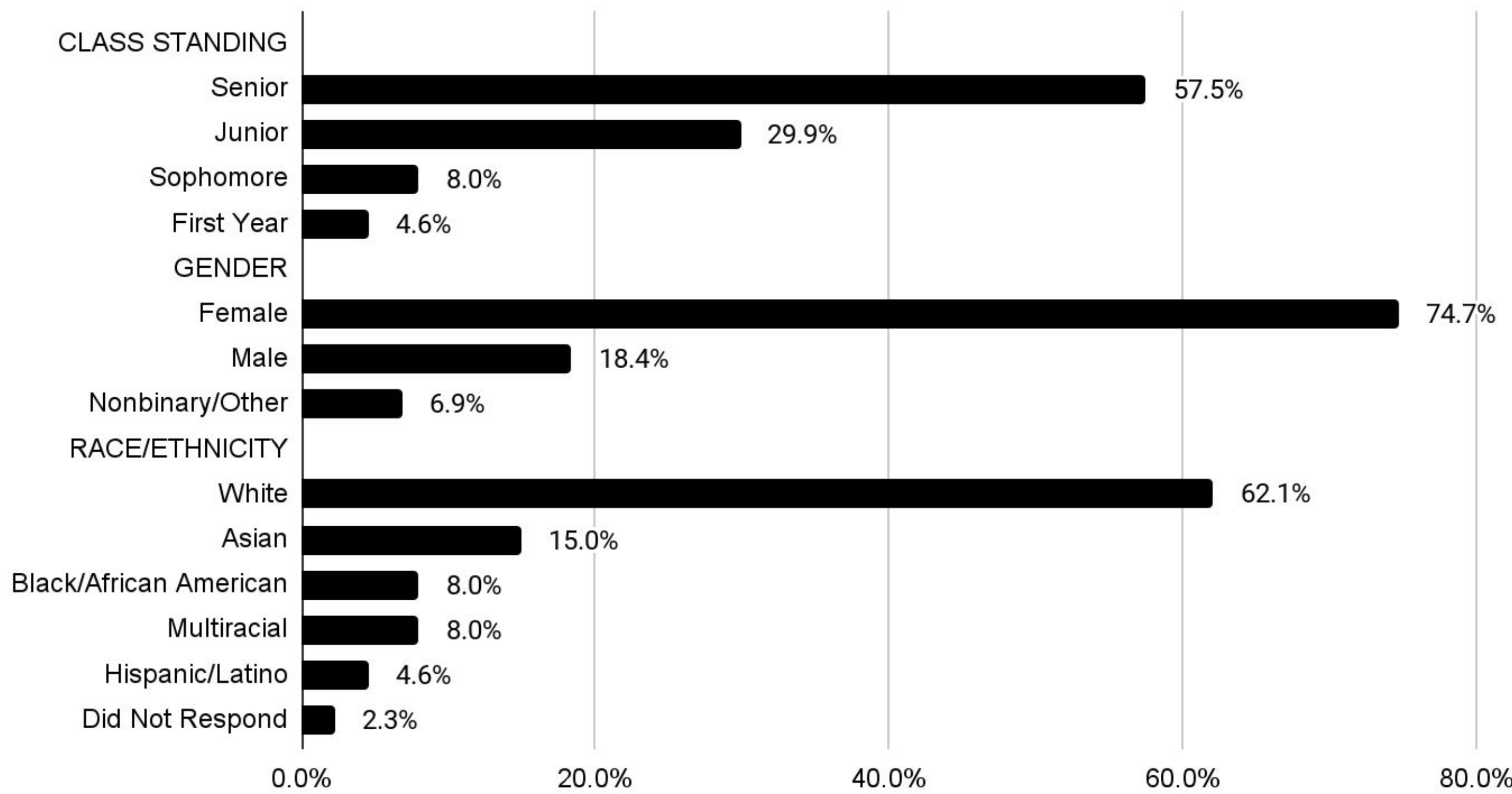
Recruitment

- Began following IRB approval on August 28th, 2024 and concluded October 21st, 2024
- Initial recruitment via BLine and approved flyers in high-traffic areas on campus
- Follow-up recruitment through department-specific email listservs
- Encouraged participant referral-based sampling in recruitment materials and consent form
- Raffle incentive for two \$50 Amazon gift cards

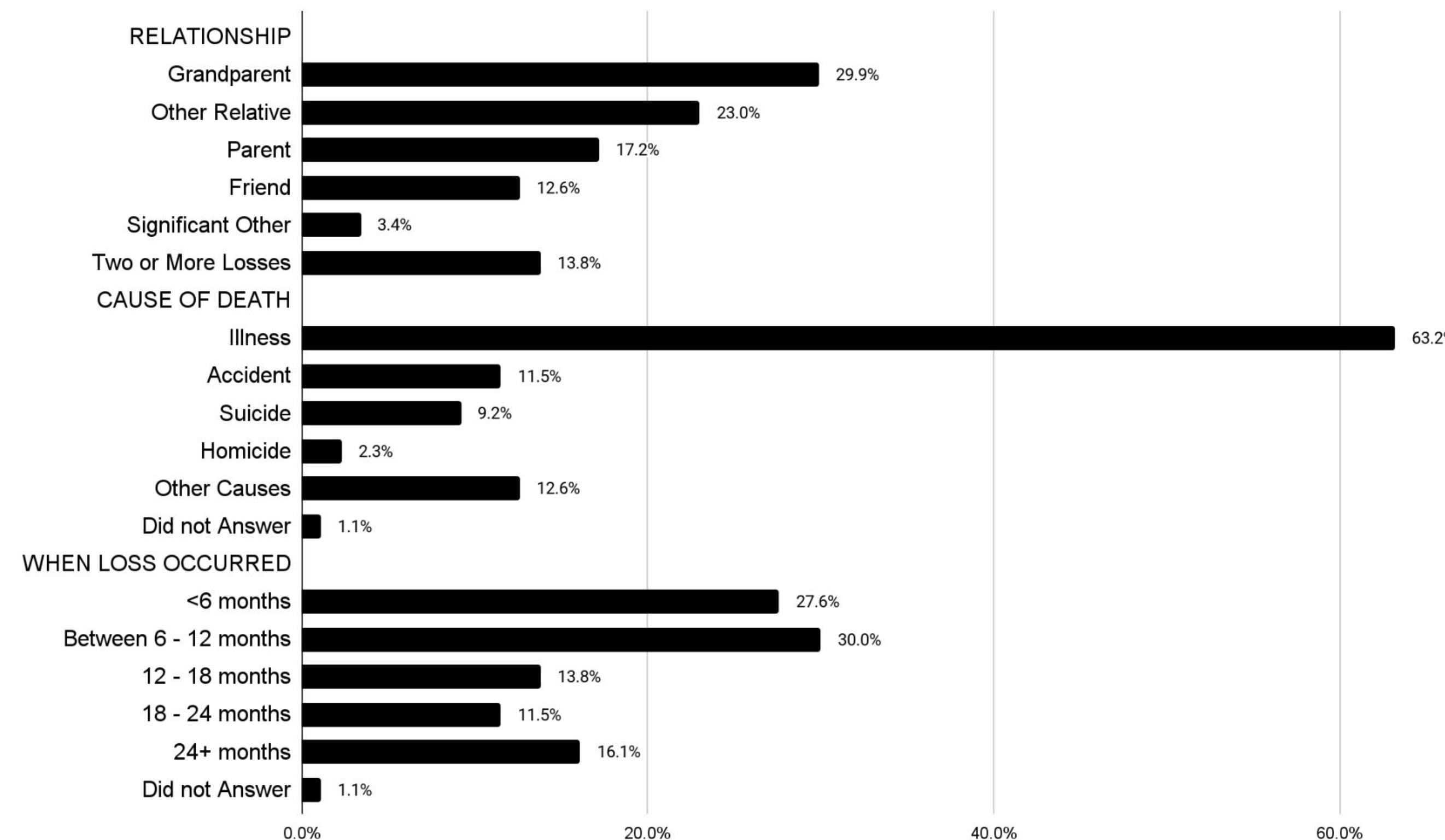
PARTICIPANTS

N=194 Respondents; n=87 Responses Eligible for Analysis

Respondent Demographic Characteristics



Information About the Loss



Currently Receiving Counseling Services	Specifically for the Loss	Have Received Counseling Services in the Past	Specifically for the Loss
10.3%	33.3%	19.5%	35.3%

DISCUSSION

- **Low Engagement with Counseling Services**
 - Consistent with college student bereavement research, the majority of bereaved students at Binghamton University do not utilize formalized counseling services to help cope with their loss.
 - However, this study revealed that connected vs. not connected with counseling services is not a simple delineation. Many students indicated that they had accessed services outside of the university.
- **Incongruence in Awareness and Experience of Resilience**
 - Students report clear and consistent understandings of the behaviors, cognitions, and emotions associated with resilience & non-resilience.
 - However, their resilience scores were below the national average - 80.3% were in the lowest quartile (1-25% of the population). The mean score on the instrument (US general population) is 79, whereas the mean for this study was 61.8 (it is important to note that many studies of college students have yielded scores 3-5 points lower than the US adult population mean).
 - These findings suggest the need to explore ways to strengthen coping or adaptability. Low resilience scores may accompany clinical depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- **Behaviors Associated with Resilience & Non-Resilience**
 - Resilience: Functional, adapting to the loss, maintaining routines, motivated, engaging in activities to honor the deceased, social behaviors, emotional expression, self care

"I'd be able to function in my usual life. I'd be able to finish school/work. I think a sign of being "OK" might even be more openness in talking about the fact that she's gone and how it makes me feel. I wouldn't need to shove all my feelings down, but it would be nice if they weren't all that existed, the way it is sometimes."

- Non-Resilience: Motivational decline, derailing, routine disruption, suppressing emotions, maladaptive social and coping behaviors, lingering on the loss, poor self care, excessive crying, avoidance/escapism

"I want to be able to fully participate in my education. And to feel excited about learning. I want the future to not feel so terrifying. I want to have tools. To understand what's happening to me. To not feel ashamed. I want failure to not feel so enormous."

- **Cognitions Associated with Resilience & Non-Resilience**
 - Resilience: Self reflection, acceptance and understanding, not fixating on the loss, remembering the deceased, beliefs and mantras, future-oriented, able to focus, able to distract oneself and reframe thoughts, self confidence, feeling ready to move on

"I think at this point I am OK, I used to feel guilt when I was happy, that I should not be happy while I was mourning my father, but I recognize that he would want me to be happy. More importantly than that, even if he didn't want me to be happy, I want me to be happy! When I reconciled the fact that what I imagined he would want from me is just my brain telling me what I want for myself, I became more at peace with my grief."

- Non-Resilience: Suicidal ideation, challenges with focus, unable to accept the new reality of the loss, fixating on the loss, survivor's guilt, experiencing psychological triggers, negative self-talk, feeling like a burden to others, lacking closure

"Suicidal ideation and not being able to focus. I've been behind in my work still since the start of the semester and I don't feel as though I have the room to grieve in my schedule because of the workload. I also feel obligated to show up to class often and feel embarrassed when I'm not paying attention and get called out or start crying in class without stepping out of the room in case I miss something important."

- **Emotions Associated with Resilience & Non-Resilience**
 - Resilience: Experiencing a full and wide range of emotions or feelings, emotional stability, and 'keeping it together'

"The hurt doesn't go away but your heart grows around it."

- Non-Resilience: Muted emotions, intensified emotions, negative and intense feelings, repression or suppression of emotions

"I feel numb, and have a hard time with what I am feeling at a given moment. My memory is worse, my attention is worse, and I have gaps in my memory from around when the person died. I have not processed the loss in any real way, I feel nothing surrounding their death."

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- **Timeline**
 - The study is expected to be conducted over one calendar year, ending in Summer 2025.
 - The next phase of the study involves authoring research findings in a publishable manuscript.
- **Funding Sources**
 - Researcher-funded. Currently seeking funding via the CCPA Research Fund, UUP Individual Development Awards, or other sources to support research activities (i.e., incentives, instrument costs, printing fees, travel).
- **Dissemination Plan**
 - Findings from this study will be distributed via peer-reviewed journals and presented at refereed conferences in 25-26, including those in the fields of bereavement, student affairs, and higher education.
 - Target Conferences: Association of Death Education and Counseling (ADEC); International Death, Grief, and Bereavement Conference
 - Target Journals: *OMEGA Journal of Death & Dying*, *Death Studies*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*
 - A manuscript from this study will be used for PI's comprehensive examination in Fall 2025.
- **Future Studies**
 - n=57 participants expressed interest in follow-up study, which will serve as a catalyst for forthcoming dissertation project.

REFERENCES

