# The Death of an Academic Department: Sense-losing and Sacred Loss

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# The Death of an Academic Department: Sense-losing and Sacred Loss

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**Abstract:** An unexpected academic department closure can be deeply unsettling to many stakeholders. Department closure is typically intended to be a cost-saving measure; however, department closure can be a difficult, time-consuming process with unexpected consequences. This study takes a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to explore the impact of the closure of an academic department. Participants were enrolled in one of the department's academic programs at the time of the closure announcement and during data collection. Results indicated that participants sanctified the department, a process in which persons instill an object or aspect of their lives with spiritual significance (Pargament et al., 2005). The closure prompted participants to experience a cosmology episode in which a sudden shift in worldview occurred, and participants indicated being in the sense-losing stage where meaning had not yet been made. The findings of this study can serve as a model for leadership at all levels who are considering program closures, with particular attention on how to assist students.

**Keywords:** academic program closure, higher education, spirituality, mission

In 1976, 10 individuals came together to form the first class of students in the Pastoral Counseling (PC) Department at Loyola University Maryland. Over the past 40 years, the program grew to include a Master of Arts in Spiritual and Pastoral Care, a Master of Science (MS) in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, a Certificate of Advanced Study, a MS/PhD program, and a PhD program in Counselor Education and Supervision. The MS and PhD programs were accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) as well

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as the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC). It was an internationally renowned program, known for its academic rigor and strong contributions to the social scientific literature through research in the field of spiritually integrative care. Over the last twenty years, graduates of the PC program have regularly scored in the 98th percentile of the National Counselor's Exam (NCE), an exam offered through the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) (Department of Pastoral Counseling, 2018).

The program had a unique focus on integrating spirituality and religiosity into clinical mental healthcare or ministry. As such, the program drew a diverse array of students in regard to age, racial/ethnic identity, geographical location of origin and background. The department strongly aligned with the university's Jesuit mission, and students enrolled in the program had a variety of spiritual and religious backgrounds, including but not limited to persons who identified as Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Pagan, as well as those who were not affiliated with a religious/spiritual tradition. The Jesuit heritage informed and shaped the program in a variety of explicit and implicit ways, including the emphasis on discernment, service, social justice, and care for the whole person (Department of Pastoral Counseling, 2018). This research explores the unexpected closure of the department, announced to students via email on January 6, 2017.

With rising fiscal pressures and changes in enrollment, many colleges and universities are faced with difficult decisions, including the decision to close programs or departments. Department closure is often intended to allow the larger institution to remain viable through reallocating resources and saving costs (Eckel, 2002). However, closing an academic department can have unexpected and unintended consequences. It may also prove to be significantly more difficult and time-consuming than anticipated. Smaller, mission-driven institutions may experience a heightened tension when closing academic programs or departments due to budgetary constraints, student enrollment, and program relatedness to mission. Administrators need to balance program relatedness to mission along with the financial viability of the program. At times, decision-makers will be faced with the need to make difficult choices about programs that may be integral to the mission but are a source of financial loss.

The following is a case study of the student experience of program discontinuance due to financial constraints at a Catholic institution. Students in the department viewed the departmental mission in alignment with the institutional mission, and many experienced profound distresses when the department was closed. The initial inception for this study took place in a doctoral level course on qualitative research methodology and design. The study was designed, developed, and implemented in response to experiencing unintended consequences of the departmental closure, namely the distress experienced by students, faculty, and staff. The following study took place about a year after the department closure was announced. The study attempts to explore students' lived experiences of the closure, many of whom identified the experience as deeply unsettling.

# Theoretical Grounding

## Organizational Death

Nearly half of all organizations die in the first five years of life, and only about 10 percent survive beyond 20 years (Harris & Sutton, 1986). Sutton (1987) intentionally used death as a metaphor in his scholarship to describe organizational demise. He emphasized that organizations are living and dying systems, breathing life into our social fabric. Some research suggests that the loss experienced by the death of an organization is similar to the loss from the death of a friend (Bell & Taylor, 2011; Harris & Sutton, 1986). Organizational death "poses a profound threat to the structure of social relations" (Harris & Sutton, 1986, p. 6), as organizations form important social spaces in society. Organizational death can have a wide range of impacts, including economic, social, and personal consequences. Such broad impacts make organizational closures a salient topic for a wide range of academic disciplines and professionals.

## Organizational Death at Academic Institutions

Research on department closures at universities has noted several factors that impact whether or not the transition is handled with ease or if the system goes into crisis. The decrease in federal funding, the reorientation of universities as businesses, and the increased view of students as customers places a greater burden on academic institutions to understand the impact of organizational transitions on students (Zell, 2003). Gumport (1993) used two case studies to explore academic program reduction from an organizational lens by interviewing twenty administrators and forty faculty on how they made sense of the organizational response to fiscal pressure. Results of the research indicated that program discontinuance was most positive when faculty and administrators experienced consensus and collaboration during the process.

Eckel (2002) suggests that program discontinuance is not as easy for those with decision-making authority, many of whom are in administrative positions. Also noted (Eckel, 2002) is the tendency for decisions to be made without exhaustively exploring all options. Department closure can be seen as a necessary measure for those making the decision, often for financial reasons, but it can result in high levels of uncertainty for impacted faculty and staff (Donoff & Rosser, 2016). While some experience a departmental closure as unnecessary or highly distressing, those with decision-making power may see it as a "good enough" or necessary decision to preserve the long-term viability of the institution.

In a review of the literature related to governance and administration, Kezar and Eckel (2004) acknowledged the increasingly complex decisions administrators are being asked to make. They also noted many administrators do not feel adequately prepared to best respond to the complex issues set before them, particularly as they are often asked to make decisions quickly and effectively. Faculty and staff are impacted by decisions administration make, and research suggests employees respond better to organizational uncertainty or change when they are given a chance to participate or offer their perspective (Bordia et al., 2004). Some research points to the student experience of program discontinuance; departmental closure can elicit a wide range of emotional

responses from students, including betrayal, anger, and grief (Maher, 2006). In these situations, students experience and reconcile with program closure through phases. Students respond best in the face of program closure when they receive clear communication, unambiguous responses, and assurance of the worth of their degree. While program termination can be difficult, the research indicates there are best practices in the face of difficult decisions.

Program discontinuance as related to institutional mission is an area of research that has been given relatively little attention. Given that Catholic institutions are uniquely mission driven, it is valuable to explore how mission may impact the way in which decisions are made and mission influence. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae,* the seminal papal encyclical that outlines that nature and purpose of Catholic higher education, states that, "The basic mission of a University is a continuous quest for truth through its research, and the preservation and communication of knowledge for the good of society" (John Paul II, 1990, para 30). It goes on to say how each Catholic institution may live out its mission in its own way, but that service, pastoral ministry, cultural dialogue, and evangelization are central parts to that mission. Many Catholic institutions live out their mission through an emphasis on spirituality and service, and the Pastoral Counseling department had an explicit focus on both.

## Spirituality and Sacred Loss

The Pastoral Counseling department supported the institutional mission through training future counselors and caregivers in a holistic, spiritually integrative manner. When the program closure was announced, it became clear that students, faculty, and staff struggled to reconcile their beliefs on what the department represented and the uncertainty that the closure brought. Many seemed to believe the department was unique and identified a sense of home and belonging in the department. According to the departmental website, the mission of the department was to instruct "students in counseling and care-giving techniques which integrate pastoral, spiritual, and scientific dimensions" (Department of Pastoral Counseling, 2018). As such, students drawn to the department typically had a profound interest in spirituality on a personal and academic level, reinforced by departmental and institutional values.

Although the term "spirituality" has many different definitions in the empirical literature, for the purposes of this article it will be defined as "a search for the sacred" (Pargament, 2011, p. 32). Objects can be sanctified directly or indirectly by attributing to them qualities such as transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. These sacred qualities in turn have the capacity to invoke a sense of extraordinariness, awe and wonder (Pargament, 2011). As a result, people tend to put more effort into safeguarding sacred matters of their lives (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005), which provide a sense of meaning and fulfillment. However, if a sanctified object is taken away, either by natural or violent events, it can result in a profound sense of mental, emotional, and/or spiritual suffering (Pargament et al., 2005).

Many students seemed to sanctify their engagement in the department, even prior to the closure. For instance, students commonly referred to being "called" to the department and the profession. This language is consistent with larger institutional values and ideals as a Jesuit, Catholic in-

stitution. Scholars have defined a "calling" as finding a sense of purpose or personal fulfillment in one's work or profession (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Wzesniewski, 2002). Those who view their work as a "calling" tend to have better psychological health across several dimensions (Wzesniewski, 2002). Inversely, those who feel they have lost their calling can experience profound distress and a sense of moral failure (Conkin, 2012). Based on this research, it is possible that students who felt a sense of calling through their educational pursuits experienced the program discontinuance as the loss of something sacred.

## Cosmology Episodes

Weick (1993) used the terminology "cosmology episode" (p. 633) to specifically describe situations in which "people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system." This definition is not to be used interchangeably with words such as *crisis, trauma,* and *disaster*, as to preserve the integrity of each experience. Instead, a cosmology episode is used to describe and to distinguish those situations that involve the loss of meaning, which then shakes fundamental beliefs about the world, leading individuals to question their identity, values, and assumptions (O'Grady et al., 2013; O'Grady & Orton, 2016). Cosmology episodes involve the process of sense-losing in which the world loses meaning and becomes frightening and unfamiliar (O'Grady & Orton, 2015).

Cosmology episodes can be identified by the level of impairment that they cause in seven areas: (1) connectedness, (2) faith and religious belief systems, (3) value systems, (4) meaning and purpose in life, (5) self-transcendence, (6) inner peace and harmony, and (7) inner strength and energy (Agrimson & Taft, 2009). They can occur on an individual scale or may be experienced at the team, community, organizational, or social levels (Orton & O'Grady, 2016). The word cosmology denotes "a mythological account of the origin of the universe and all of its' meaning" (Roux-Dufort, 2007, p. 110), and the crisis of the cosmology episode is centered upon the crisis of meaning and questioning of existence. A cosmology episode is not just about a specific event, but rather about the process of the event. This process is captured in O'Grady and Orton's Cosmology Episodes Model which is encapsulated by 5 stages: anticipation, sense-losing, transformational pivots, sense remaking, and renewal (O'Grady et al., 2013; O'Grady & Orton, 2016). The concept of the present study grew from the researchers' negative experience of the department closure as they struggled to make sense of the loss.

## Method

This study takes a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to capture, describe, and understand the lived experiences of students after an unexpected announcement of the closure of their academic department. Phenomenology as a form of qualitative inquiry is intended to explore the experience and essence of the subject matter (Patton, 2015). As such, students enrolled in the department were invited to participate in interviews based on carefully constructed questions designed to capture their experiences.

## Participants

A total of 17 students were interviewed for the purposes of this study via individual interviews and focus groups. Nine individuals participated in individual interviews, and a total of ten individuals were engaged in the focus group. Two participants were involved in both a focus group interview and an individual interview. To protect participant confidentiality, certain demographic information was not collected; however, research participants were at all stages in their academic journey, including students who had just finished their first semester in the master's program to doctoral students actively working on their dissertations.

## Procedure

After IRB approval, students enrolled in the department at the masters, doctoral, or certificate level at the time of the study were invited to participate in individual interviews and/or focus group interviews. Participants interested in individual interviews were assigned to one of four interviewers. Participants interested in focus groups were given the choice of participating in one of two different groups. Participants were informed of the purpose and procedure of the study. After informed consent was obtained, all participants were questioned through a semi-structured interview format. Questions were formulated to assess participants' experience of the closure of the department in several ways, including their decision-making process and ability to make meaning. Sample questions included "What was your experience receiving the news about the closing of the Pastoral Counseling Department?" and "How has this department closure ultimately weakened or strengthened you?" In the process of creating sample interview questions, it became apparent that the researchers were interested in capturing specific data that could be assessed through a Likert-style questionnaire, and other phenomenon required obtaining data through an interview process. It was collectively decided that all participants would have the opportunity to fill out a brief questionnaire and participate in a semi-structured interview in order to address the research questions in an efficient and comprehensive manner. As such, a five-point Likert scale questionnaire containing ten questions was created and filled out by participants. On the scale, selecting "1" indicated strong disagreement and selecting "5" indicated strong agreement. Examples of questions asked included "The department closure was a crisis for me" and "I have not been able to make meaning out of the program closure."

Participants involved in the focus groups followed the same process as outlined above regarding informed consent, the Likert questionnaire, and the semi-structured interview questions. Two researchers facilitated each group. One group had four participants, and the other had six. In the group of six, two of the participants also elected to have individual interviews, which were scheduled after the focus group took place. For the first half of the focus group, one researcher asked questions and facilitated discussion while the other researcher took notes. Halfway through the interview, the roles switched. The observation and notes were included in the data analysis process.

## Data Analysis

Interview and focus group data were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded using NVivo software. The first round of coding was done individually by the researchers who conducted the interview or section of the focus group. The second round of coding was done as a group. In the group setting, the researchers compared and consolidated their individual codes with the other researchers' coding. Robust discussion took place regarding the meaning of the code and the supporting data. The mean was calculated for each item on the Likert style question-naire. Five salient themes emerged from the data. See the table below of results of the Likert scale questionnaire.

Table 1

*Mean Respondent Scores of the Likert-Style Questionnaire*

| Item | Mean |
|---|---|
| I am satisfied with the teach-out plan. | 2.7 |
| The program changed my view of Jesuit values | 3.2 |
| The closure of the program took something sacred from me | 4.1 |
| The teach-out plan has negatively affected the quality of the program | 4.2 |
| The department closure was a crisis for me. | 3.2 |
| I have not been able to make meaning out of the program closure | 2.3 |
| The closure has not negatively impacted my spirituality/religion | 4.5 |
| I still would have enrolled in the program had I known it would close. | 3.1 |
| I believe the reasons for the program closure were plausible. | 2.3 |
| I believe a higher force "called" or brought me to the PC department | 3.9 |
| The pastoral counseling program is holy or sacred to me. | 3.2 |
| The closing of the department is a violation of something spiritual to me | 3.1 |

## Results

Five themes emerged from the data and revealed that students experienced the department discontinuance as a profound loss. The five themes are as follows: a) the acute stage b) the nature of the loss; c) the experience of the loss; d) the consequences of the loss; and e) the sense-making process.

### The Acute Stage

In a cosmology episode, the anticipation period is a critical process preceding the process of sense-losing, improvisation, sense-remaking, and renewal. The anticipation period, or the acute stage, includes people's cosmology – a set of beliefs about an organization's genesis, current identity, and future role in the universe, and the resources and contexts that precede the event

(O'Grady et al., 2013). This theme explores participants' cosmology of the department prior to its closure and the immediate experienece of sense-losing in response to the closure announcement.

Participants spoke of their cosmology related to the department. Many discussed it with a sense that the department provided some sort of unique or sacred space. One participant said there was a "shared vision" embodied in those affiliated with the program, and that, "I've been touched by that [shared vision]… I have been mentored by the depth and the legacy of this program." Another participant pointed to the sanctification of the department by stating, "I think there is an element of the sacred when we as a group are together studying, debating, thinking about things that no one else really does in our field."

Many students reported profound shock at the announcement of the program closure. Participants indicated surprise and frustration at the actions of the administration and reported feeling as though the administration did not understand the value of the program. There was a disconnect between the reality of the closure and students' perception of the program's worth. One participant expressed this sentiment through discussing the department's status as one of two CACREP accredited programs in the state:

> I came in knowing the value that a CACREP accreditation created, and that's why it was mind-boggling to me that they closed it… To me, that sounds like poor stewardship because CACREP is hard to get, and it has a lot of value.  And if you have that [CACREP accreditation], there's a way to market that to the people regardless of the pastoral component.

A major event prior to the announcement of the closure was the 40th anniversary celebration (Weaver, 2016). The event was promoted by the university and well-attended by current students, faculty, and staff. It served as a homecoming event for alumni and previous faculty and staff. Administrators were present at the event and spoke highly of the department. For participants, the event served as a poignant example of how their previous trust in the institution was shaken:

> They just celebrated the 40-year anniversary, and the betrayal.  How could they?  They would have known [they were closing the department]. They did know. They said for the past year that the administration had known and been planning for the last year. So, they still committed and never said a word about [the closure at] the 40th anniversary. And then went ahead and said they look forward to another 40 years.

## The Nature of the Loss

All participants indicated feeling some sort of "calling" or "vocation" to the program or the profession, which contributed to what respondents perceived as a sense of sacred loss. The Likert scale indicated that the closure of the program took something from respondents ($M = 4.1$). Based on the qualitative data, it was surmised that the something sacred was related to the view of the department and what it represented. One participant stated, "that sort of 'sacred space' was absolutely lost" as a result of the department closure. Participants also felt as though the depart-

ment closure was a violation of institutional values. One participant said, "I see the closure as a mere capitalism and greed, and it denounces the value why we are here at a Jesuit institution at a pastoral counseling department." Some participants experienced the loss as disorienting. When reflecting on the future, one participant stated:

> I don't have a clear vision of my future. I don't know what I'm doing after this. That feels like weakness. I think spiritually that could be argued one way or the other whether or not that's weakness, but it feels like weakness because it feels like death.

Participants reported the loss as ongoing. They discussed the movement from initial shock to the increased negative affect of the department, the dwindling number of students, professors, and staff, and the reduced quality of education. One participant summed up this experience by stating, "Everybody who could got off the sinking ship. And those of us who stayed behind wondered, 'Should we have grabbed one of the lifeboats?'"

## The Experience of the Loss

Metaphors such as feeling orphaned or having lost a home were used to describe the experience of the department closure. Some participants used the word trauma. Many participants experienced it as a crisis according to the Likert questionnaire ($M = 3.2$). Other participants used the metaphor of death. One participant stated:

> It's like hospice. We are not dead yet, but everybody knows that we are dying…. it's like when you are dealing with a person in hospice. One day they look all right, but they progressively need more oxygen or need to be on the IV, and things get progressively worse. And that's what's happening here.

Participants reported distrust and frustration at the lack of transparency. Common issues mentioned were a lack of clarity on who made the decision to close the department and why the decision was made. This distrust came from a perceived lack of communication and poor management of the closure. Participants indicated a high level of disagreement to the statement on the questionnaire, "I believe the reason for the program closure were plausible" ($M = 2.3$). As one participant stated, "I think it's very nebulous why the program closed. I think there is a lot of misinformation that is out there." The president of the institution was most often perceived as the individual who was ultimately responsible for the decision. Members of a focus group reported they perceived the closure to be the result of systemic issues across the institution. They felt as though the closure was "political" and financially motivated. The focus group named the administration of the university as those who were ultimately responsible. One participant, when discussing who or what was responsible for the department closure, said:

> I've been lumping it under "they." Whoever "they" is. I don't know. That's how little information I have about the decision-making process. Maybe it was the president. That seems to be the most logi-

cal choice. But it could have been some VP. Or some chair of some department that wants the money and the resources and is whispering into somebody's ear. I don't know.

The sense of betrayal for participants was particularly poignant when they discussed the optics of the institution. As mentioned previously, participants experienced cognitive dissonance when thinking of the department discontinuance in relation to the Jesuit values of the institution or the 40th year anniversary celebration. Participants experienced the loss as more profound because they felt a lack of transparency and communication from those with decision-making authority. Participants also reported a sense of incongruence between the decision made and the university's mission. This state of tension and struggle to make sense of the loss indicates participants were within the sense-losing stage.

## The Consequences of the Loss

Participants described emotional turmoil and the failure to find answers as some of the consequences of the loss, along with other psychological, cognitive, and practical impacts. One participant reported feeling "a little bit of despair, and little bit of panic, and a feeling of groundlessness…The experience of the closure left me very confused and with many questions without answers." Due to the department discontinuance, participants reported having to use different coping strategies, some more helpful than others. One participant reported their coping technique as "Compartmentalization. I just put it to the back burner, to the back of my mind to focus on the things in front of me….I just pushed it to the back."

Participants expressed concern over the perceived value of their degree by future employers. Participants also reported a negative consequence of closing the program in relationship to the larger community, such as fewer persons trained as helping professionals. Others noted there could be a decrease in the number of low-cost mental health options due to a decreased number of interns. One participant said, "I think about the damage and the intensity of the damage to shut down this program….I am thinking about all of those families in our society." The Likert-style questionnaire indicated that students were also concerned that the quality of the program was negatively impacted by the teach-out plan ($M$ = 4.2). The teach-out plan, prepared by the university for the currently enrolled students to facilitate the completion of the program, was often identified as a challenging consequence of the program closure. It was perceived as an intervention that the university engaged in as a matter of legal necessity, rather than a careful consideration of how to support students. The mean from the Liker-style questionnaire ($M$ = 2.7) indicated students were dissatisfied with the teach-out plan. One participant said,

It was clear that they didn't know what was involved in the teach-out plan, what they were required by the law. It seemed like they were making it up along as they go, or making the department make it up as they went along.

Participants experienced the teach-out plan similar to an ultimatum with no desirable options; they either had to accept it or they had to leave.

**The Sensemaking Process**

Prior to conducting the study, researchers assumed participants had experienced a cosmology episode and would be in the process of making meaning. However, it was revealed that participants were in the sense-losing process of a cosmology episode and had not yet begun to make meaning out of the loss. Despite this, most participants indicated that the program did not negatively impact their spirituality/religion, per the Likert-style questionnaire ($M = 4.5$). Participants worked to find meaning through suffering, a concept frequently discussed in the department, through identifying personal growth, finding solidarity with peers, or seeing the loss as an opportunity to rework previous goals. When discussing the process of trying to make sense of the closure, one participant stated,

> I do not see God's movement in the closure, but I know God will move through it....It doesn't have to look like what I thought it should look like when I came into this program in 20[redacted]. And it can still be meaningful and make meaning. It can still make meaning and be sacred.

Other participants indicated difficulties in making meaning and discussed using their spirituality or faith as a resource. One participant stated:

> I have the continual questions and conversations with God that are like, 'Alright, well, you put me here. I know it's for a reason, so you know, I will stick it out, and I will be obedient and trust that You have something in this for me'. But at the same time, I think I wait expectantly for whatever the gem is. And it might not be a gem. It might just be the end.

Another participant reported one of the ways in which they made sense of the loss was through receiving clarity in their career path and spirituality: "It has caused me to draw deeper into my own spirituality and get really clear about what I'm doing and why I'm doing it, degree or no degree." Another participant reported an increased sense of certitude of their calling to the profession and stated,

> A friend of mine said to me, 'I am not okay with a world in which you don't become a therapist.' I am not giving up on this calling. Like I am good at it, and I love doing it...I feel more, most myself and most alive when I am able to work with clients.

## Discussion

The department closure created a profound sense of discontent for students in the program. All participants reported struggling to find meaning in response to the closure, which suggests they were still in the process of sense-losing. Some responded primarily about their personal losses (e.g. identity, legacy, academic rigor), while others commented on the loss of the department for the field. Many reflected on the sense of loss in relationship to having felt "called" to the program. Similar to research on sacred loss, those who described features of sacred loss seemed to

have imbued their experience in the department as a formational experience (Gumport,1993; Pargament, et al., 2005). Consistent with Dutton's (1987) seminal research, metaphors of death were common among respondents when describing the current atmosphere of the department with blame being assigned to administration, faculty, and the president.

Participants reported that positive religious coping helped support them in finding meaning and turning towards spiritual growth in the face of a sacred loss. This finding is congruent with previous research that points to a strong correlation between greater religious/spiritual resources and greater personal, post-traumatic and spiritual growth (Denney, Aten, & Leavell, 2011; Pargament et al., 2011) and the prospect of spirituality providing resiliency during a cosmology episode (O'Grady & Orton, 2016). Participants in the present research may have been better equipped to address and utilize positive coping skills due to the program's emphasis on this phenomenon.

Steger et al. (2010) indicated that a sense of calling has the potential to increase psychological wellbeing through positive attitudes towards work and life. If such a calling in life is lost, however, negative emotions and attitudes may develop. Participants' response to the department closure aligns with these findings. Students who are able to safeguard their sense of calling (sacred or secular) and who are provided with appropriate support for their academic and professional trajectories may be able to lessen the negative emotions as a result of the program closure. This support would differ based on where the student was in their own process of sensemaking, and what phase the program was in after the closure announcement (Maher, 2006). Offering counseling and career services could be one way to assist students in navigating through the time of uncertainty and equip students to make decisions about their future.

In addition to increasing mental health care to individuals impacted, individuals can move through sense-losing to sensemaking through finding new meaning. Formal rituals or ceremonies can be especially helpful for students dealing with department closures. Dutton (1986) found that parting ceremonies for individuals across eight dying organizations helped ease the loss and reconstruct the sensemaking schemata of displaced members, managers, and other stakeholders. Research on closures indicate collaborative and compassionate transitions are less emotionally and practically unsettling for other stakeholders (Claire, Ladge, & Cotton, 2016). Another way to facilitate sensemaking is through community experiences. Many participants in the study indicated they felt little to no collective effort or problem-solving in response to the financial state of the department and the institution, despite evidence to support the usefulness of community problem solving in regarding economic pressures (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006). A collaborative approach could have been a useful way to decrease negative interpersonal consequences of the closure.

## Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without its limitations. Researchers of this study were graduate students and faculty who also experienced the phenomenon of interest. This allowed researchers access to participants and an intimate understanding of several factors present; however, it may have impacted participants' responses and the lens through which data was analyzed and interpreted. To coun-

teract this, researchers participated in reflexive engagement practices, examining assumptions, thoughts, and feelings (Morrow, Castañeda-Sound, & Abrams, 2012), bracketing them when with participants (Smith, 2007). Researchers also engaged in other "checks" such as frequent discussion, attempting to explore alternative viewpoints, and coding data separately.

Another limitation of the study is the uniqueness of the department itself. It is a departmental norm to discuss the integration of religion and spirituality in psychology, counseling, and life. Participants may have a heightened sensitivity or a larger vocabulary to describe the experiences they had in a spiritual framework. Individuals who are less likely to describe themselves as religious or spiritual may not experience the same sense of sacred loss after a departmental closure.

The results of the study and the model of cosmology episodes indicate the reality of process, in that responses to events such as this are not stagnant. Data were gathered over a year after the department closure, but results may have been vastly different if the study had taken place immediately after the announcement or several years post announcement. It should also be noted that only students who stayed in the department were included in this analysis; the perspective of those that chose to transfer to another institution or not continue their studies was not captured. It would be valuable for future research to explore the experience of departmental closure over time, as well as for those who engaged in different decision-making processes.

Future research would do well to explore this phenomenon in departments with less explicit integration of spiritual and religious themes. Very little work has been done exploring program discontinuance from students' perspective in a quantitative format. Administration, faculty, and other stakeholders should be called to better understand the impacts of program closure on the students to appropriately address students' emotional, cognitive, and spiritual needs. A major theme that emerged was the perceived lack of transparency in the decision-making process and rationale. Administration considering program or department discontinuance should consider ways in which to make the process as transparent as possible, and to place clear communication as a priority. Beyond the call for transparency and clarity, resting on the institutional mission and charism as a guiding point may be helpful for those with decision-making power, particularly when closing programs that are deeply informed by both.

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