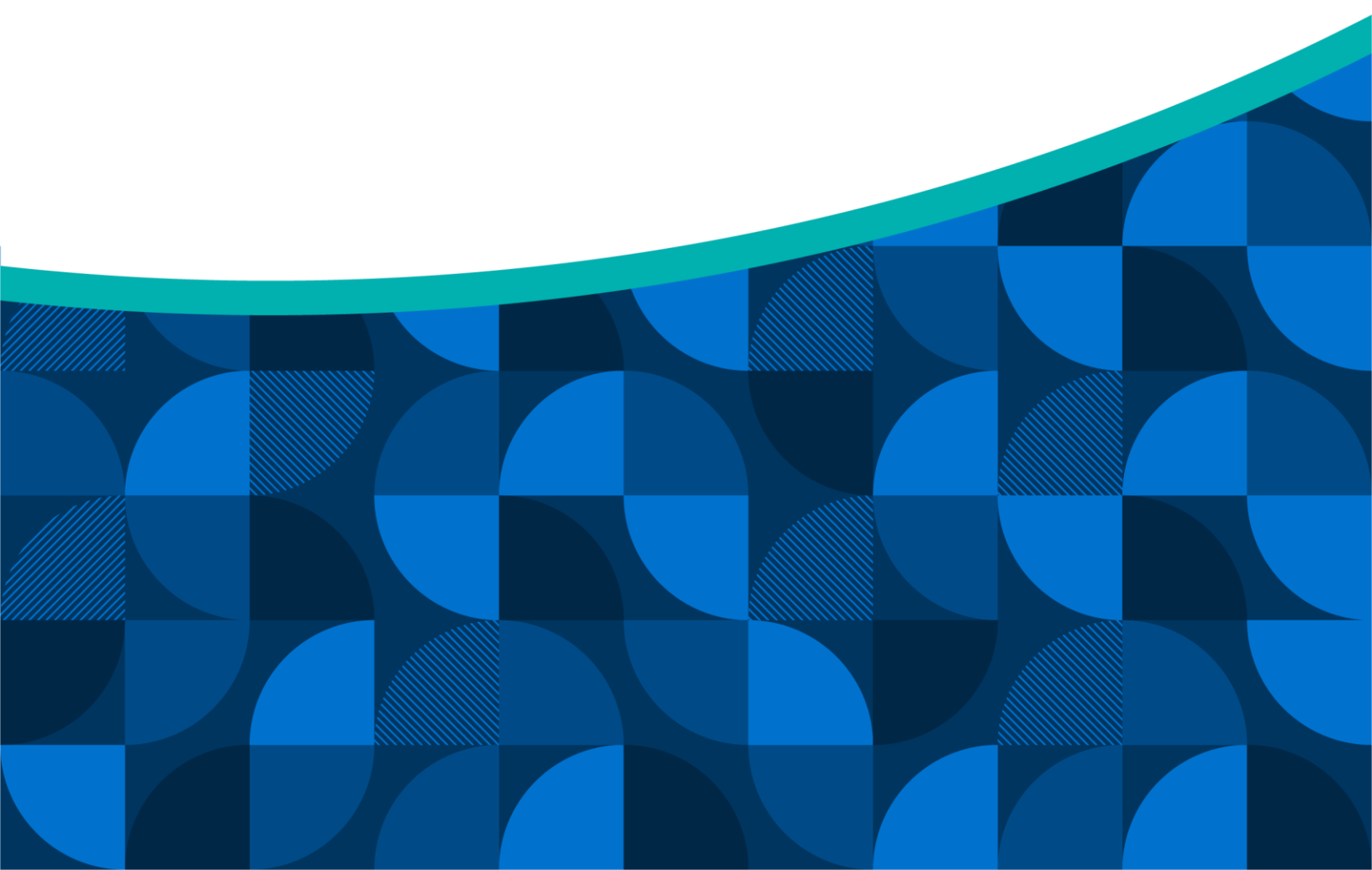




RESEARCH REPORT

Navigating Student Death

A Best Practice Guide for Student Affairs Leaders



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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.	5
Pitfall #1: Having no formal protocol or having a protocol that is overly focused on administrative tasks.	6
Pitfall #2: Waiting until a student death occurs to pull together the core response team.	9
Pitfall #3: Assuming faculty, staff, and student leaders are aware of and know how to use the student death protocol.	12
Pitfall #4: Notifying a family that their student died instead of working with local authorities to do so.	16
Pitfall #5: Notifying the entire campus community using the same uniform message after every student death.	19
Pitfall #6: Assuming canceling classes is the best way to provide space for students, faculty, and staff to heal.	22
Pitfall #7: Taking a bespoke approach to memorials for each student death.	25
Conclusion and Next Steps	29

Prepare Your Student Death Response Now

Executive Summary

Unfortunately, student death is a matter of when, not if for university leaders. Institutions need to prepare in advance to meet their campus community's emotional needs and facilitate grieving and healing in the aftermath of a student death. Not having a comprehensive process or handling each situation as a standalone incident comes with an increased likelihood that institutions mishandle the essential steps needed to support campus healing. When leaders center community care and well-being and prioritize consistency and timeliness in their response, they mitigate risks to student, faculty, and staff safety and avoid creating the perception that the institution values some student lives more than others.

EAB's research team found that planning your institution's student death response proactively can ensure an equitable and compassionate response, facilitate healthy grieving, and avoid flashpoints in the aftermath of a tragic student loss. When leaders prepare their student death response plan ahead of time and keep it up to date, they can avoid these seven common pitfalls:



Pitfalls in Institutional Responses to Student Death

- 1** Having no formal protocol or having a protocol that is overly focused on administrative tasks.
- 2** Waiting until a student death occurs to pull together the core response team.
- 3** Assuming faculty, staff, and student leaders are aware of and know how to use the student death protocol.
- 4** Notifying a family that their student died instead of working with local authorities to do so.
- 5** Notifying the entire campus community using the same uniform message after every student death.
- 6** Assuming canceling classes is the best way to provide space for students, faculty, and staff to heal.
- 7** Taking a bespoke approach to memorials for each student death.

Read on to learn more about these pitfalls and the best practices you can use to avoid them.

Create and Maintain a Campus-Specific Death Protocol



Pitfall #1: Having no formal protocol or having a protocol that is overly focused on administrative tasks.

Having a formal written protocol helps institutions stabilize the campus community; mobilize well-being resources to impacted students, faculty, and staff; and mitigate risks in the aftermath of a student death. However, most institutions' protocols are either outdated or overlook key components of the campus healing process.



Recommendation: Ensure institutional preparedness by proactively creating and regularly updating a campus-specific student death protocol.

It is not possible for a protocol to cover every possible component of a student death response. However, having a standard, up-to-date protocol can guide leaders through 80-90% of the process during the high stress moments that follow student death, which mitigates risk and ensures a consistent and thorough institutional response. EAB recommends the following action items to address gaps in your current approach.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:

- ▶ Create a written student death protocol that outlines the steps you will take to stabilize the community, handle administrative tasks, and facilitate the grieving and healing process on campus.
- ▶ Review and update your student death protocol annually and after each incident to address gaps in your protocol and keep up with evolving best practice.

Create a Formal Student Death Protocol

- ▶ **Create a written student death protocol that outlines the steps you will take to stabilize the community, handle administrative tasks, and facilitate the grieving and healing process on campus.**

A best practice student death protocol is one that is formally documented in writing and is stored centrally where it can be easily accessed by key institutional leaders. It outlines key responsibilities by role or title and lists tasks in a chronological, timebound, and/or prioritized order. For example, specify what tasks will be performed during the first 24 hours (e.g., personally notifying impacted students, faculty, and staff) versus what will happen during the first week (e.g., facilitating memorial activities).

While there are individual components to each incident, most responses require the same key components (listed below). Ensure your protocol contains these elements:

“

“We’ve worked hard to build a protocol that makes sense for most situations. It helps our campus a lot to work from the same blueprint. Being clear about what the plan is and respecting the roles of those involved is important.”

*Anna Edwards, Associate Vice
President for Student Life
University of South Carolina*

”

Student Death Protocol Sample Key Components

- Steps to take in the immediate aftermath of a student death
 - How to initiate the protocol
 - Student death response team gathers as much information about the student as possible (e.g., current classes, organizations)
 - Institution confirms the family has been notified of the death by local authorities
 - Family liaison contacts the family
 - Communication and support process begins
- Essential team members and their specific roles and responsibilities
- Typical approach to identifying impacted groups and notifying them that a death has occurred
- Process for closing a student’s account (e.g., withdrawing the deceased from classes, finalizing outstanding billing, removing the deceased from fundraising listservs)
- Guidelines to facilitate the grieving and adjustment process
- Adjustments for circumstances that may alter the typical approach (e.g., death that occurs off campus, during a long break, abroad)
- Contact information for local authorities:
 - Law enforcement
 - Fire department
 - Hospitals
 - Grief and crisis counselors
 - Mental health professionals
 - Faith leaders

Review and Update Your Protocol Annually

- ▶ **Review and update your student death protocol annually and after each incident to address gaps in your protocol and keep up with evolving best practice.**

EAB recommends conducting an annual review of the student death protocol with your Vice President for Student Affairs (VP SA), Provost, and Dean of Students to ensure the protocol reflects current practice and make any necessary process improvements. Solicit process improvement feedback from members of the student death response team two to four weeks after each response effort and during annual reviews.



See EAB's **Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit** for a [protocol self-editing checklist](#) and a [student death response feedback template](#).

Appoint and Train Your Death Response Team in Advance



Pitfall #2: Waiting until after a student death occurs to pull together the core response team.

Often, members of the core response team or staff who play a role in the response (e.g., the Registrar) are not exposed to or trained on the student death protocol until a student death occurs. This can lead to a delayed response, overlooked critical steps, and duplicative efforts (e.g., multiple people verifying the death or identifying impacted students).



Recommendation: Establish a student death response team and train them regularly to enact the protocol.

It is impossible to predict how and when your institution will learn of a student death. Therefore, those who play a role in the institution's response to student death need to be prepared to report and respond to a death at any time. Educate members of the student death response team ahead of time so they can make well-informed decisions and mobilize well-being resources efficiently. Failing to do so results in, as one VP SA described it, a "baptism by fire." EAB recommends that you ensure team members are ready to go by performing the following action items.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:



Establish a student death response team.

- Create a tiered system to determine who will respond to every student death and those who will get called in on a case-by-case basis.
- Designate a leader or coordinator who is responsible for ensuring that all parts of the plan have been enacted.



Train your student death response team on the protocol in advance so they know how to respond in the moment.

- Regularly conduct onboarding/orientation for new members of the student death response team.
- Practice making tough decisions about student death through a tabletop exercise about student death.

Identify Student Death Response Team Members

► Establish a student death response team.



Create a tiered system to determine who will respond to every student death and those who will get called in on a case-by-case basis.

EAB recommends creating two lists of staff: 1) staff that will serve on the core student death response team and will be involved in leading the response efforts for every student death, and 2) individuals who may be called in depending on the circumstances of the death (such as athletic directors, directors of residential life, etc.). Use the list below to craft your student death response team. Individuals on the Tier 1 list respond to all student deaths, and individuals in Tier 2 get called in on a case-by-case basis.

Student Death Response Team List

Tier 1 Response Team:

- Vice President for Student Affairs
- Dean of Students
- Vice President for Student Affairs' Chief of Staff, if applicable
- Marketing/Communications Officer
- Campus Chaplain or Director of Spiritual and Religious Life Office
- Counseling Center Director
- Campus Safety Director

Tier 2 Response Team:

- Athletics Director
- Advancement/Alumni Relations
- IT
- Registrar/Enrollment Services
- Academic Deans
- International Services and Study Abroad
- Residential Life and Housing



Designate a leader or coordinator who is responsible for ensuring that all parts of the plan have been enacted.

Select at least three back-up coordinators in case that person is unavailable.

Equip Your Student Death Response Team to Act Quickly

▶ **Train your student death response team on the protocol in advance so they know how to respond in the moment.**



Regularly conduct onboarding/orientation for new members of the student death response team.

Review the student death protocol during the onboarding process of new members of the student death response team. Refresh this training as updates to the protocol occur.

Be sure to review the student death protocol with new presidents during their onboarding to clarify their role in the institutional response. For more guidance, see EAB'S research report: *Having Hard Conversations in Good Times: Three Questions About Student Death and Institutional Readiness Presidents Should Ask Their VP SA Annually*.



Practice making tough decisions about student death through a tabletop exercise about student death.

Collaborate with your campus security director and counseling center director to establish and run a tabletop exercise for your campus leadership. Pennsylvania Western University runs two tabletop exercises about student deaths with their cabinet and student affairs staff. For guidance on how to run these exercises on your campus, see the *Preparing to Navigate Student Death* toolkit.



“Tabletop exercises are a tangible effort that allows the team to get comfortable by exposing them to the discomfort and crises on a smaller scale.”

*Jim McGee, Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs
Wellness Services, PennWest University*



See EAB's **Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit** for [sample response team structures](#) and [student death-focused tabletop exercises](#).

Raise Awareness About the Student Death Protocol



Pitfall #3: Assuming faculty, staff, and student leaders are aware of and know how to use the student death protocol.

Although many faculty, staff, and student leaders play a role in facilitating healing on campus, they are seldom aware of the institution's student death protocol. This means campus community members who play a role in the institution's broader response to student death may mishandle key steps such as knowing how to report a death or sharing sensitive information that compromises campus well-being. Institutions whose faculty, staff, and student leaders are up to date on the student death protocol can more efficiently and effectively mobilize resources to those most impacted.



Recommendation: Deploy segmented outreach campaigns across the year to raise general community awareness of the student death protocol and remind specific community members of their roles and responsibilities.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:

- ▶ Make it easy for students, faculty, and staff to find information about the student death protocol online.
- ▶ Provide regular trainings for faculty, staff, and student leaders around the institution's death protocol to boost awareness.
- ▶ Create and distribute audience-specific guidance and just-in-time resources about student death for faculty and staff.

Share Information About the Death Protocol Online

► Make it easy to find information about the student death protocol online.

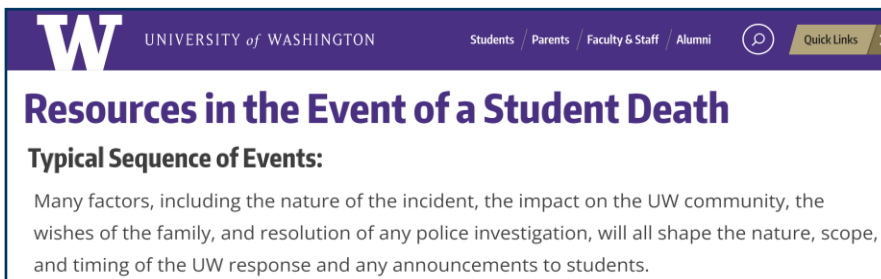
Create and distribute an overview of your typical response process. Consider sharing information about the process on your website, like the [University of Washington](#) and [University of North Carolina](#). Include the following components in your overview:

- Brief description of your institution’s response process
- Outline of your institution’s typical notification practices (*see UNC’s Campus-Wide Notifications*)
- List of available support services for campus community members and their contact information
- Outline of the types of memorials your institution hosts, if any
- Disclaimer outlining the circumstances that may reshape your approach (*see example from UW*)

Institutional Examples



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the UNC Student Affairs website. The header includes the UNC logo, 'STUDENT AFFAIRS', and 'Dean of Students'. Below the header is a menu with links: 'About Us', 'Urgent Concerns', 'Student Support', 'Faculty & Staff', 'Parents & Families', and 'Student Veterans'. The main content area is titled 'CAMPUS-WIDE NOTIFICATIONS' and contains a paragraph explaining the university's policy on student death notifications, emphasizing privacy and targeted support.



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the University of Washington website. The header includes the UW logo, 'UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON', and navigation links for 'Students', 'Parents', 'Faculty & Staff', and 'Alumni'. There is also a 'Quick Links' button. The main content area is titled 'Resources in the Event of a Student Death' and features a sub-section 'Typical Sequence of Events' with a paragraph describing the factors that influence the university's response to a student death.

Source: University of Washington, "[Resources in the Event of a Student Death](#)"; University of North Carolina, "[Student Death Protocol](#)"; EAB interviews and analysis.

Conduct Regular Trainings on the Student Death Protocol

► Provide regular trainings for faculty, staff, and student leaders around the institution's student death protocol to boost awareness.

Many members of the institution want to do something to help in the aftermath of a student death, but misguided actions may do more harm than good. Faculty, staff, and student leaders are key partners in monitoring student well-being and sharing resources in the wake of student death. EAB recommends regularly educating faculty, staff, and student leaders so you can rely on them to help manage the notification process, identify impacted students, deploy support resources, and mitigate the spread of misinformation.

For example, the University of South Carolina adapted their annual crisis management training for Greek Life leaders to educate and prepare these leaders for their roles in the process. This training touches on the following questions:

Key Components of USC's Crisis Management Training

- What are the steps of a crisis response?
 - Identify and evaluate the threat (call 911 or campus police).
 - Deescalate the situation when appropriate.
 - Develop a plan/designate roles and responsibilities.
 - In general, stop all external communications outside of the university or law enforcement.
 - Ask for help when needed.
 - Group support for teammates, friends, other group sessions
 - Coaches to monitor and be monitored for mental health concerns
- Who is your first call as a _____ (faculty member, staff member, student leader)?
- What is your primary responsibility as a _____ (faculty member, staff member, student leader)?
- What resources are available to you?
- How do you deal with the media?

Following a recent crisis, the Dean of Students spoke with the impacted fraternity's president to gather students and notify them of the death. In their initial conversation, the fraternity president cited the crisis management training and said, "I remembered the training and that we have to keep information to ourselves. I haven't told anyone yet." This made it easier for the institution to protect classified information and mobilize appropriate resources.

Share Just-in-Time Resources About Student Death

► Create and distribute audience-specific guidance and just-in-time resources about student death for faculty and staff.

Faculty and staff are well-positioned to identify students who need individualized support and connect them to resources. However, faculty and staff are not typically equipped with the tools to support students through grieving and healing. Empower faculty and staff to address the death with students by sharing resources with talking points and guidance on what not to say (e.g., do not discuss the method of death, avoid “we are all so devastated” and pathologizing language). Other materials that may be helpful include examples of grading and attendance accommodations, common signs of a student in distress, and emergency reporting structures.

Profile of Stanford’s Responding to Student Death Resource Page

Stanford University created a [Responding to Student Death](#) resource page for instructors and teaching assistants supporting students through grief and mourning. This page includes recommendations for instructors to attend to their own well-being, acknowledge the death with students and their teaching teams, and to arrange to meet students’ needs. Each instructor can choose from a variety of activities that best meet their own and their students’ needs, and the site prominently features support resources from Stanford and outside organizations. See excerpts from the site, below.

Acknowledge the Death With Students and Your Teaching Team



- Use email to communicate about your course
- Acknowledge the death in class or section
 - State your intention in acknowledging the death
 - Respect the privacy of the deceased
 - Be mindful when discussing suicide
 - Request a trained facilitator
 - Consider offering time to speak individually
 - Consider community losses
 - Make all conversations optional

Arrange to Meet Students’ Needs



- Provide flexible options, including
 - Extensions on assignments
 - Options to revise and resubmit assignments
 - Dropping the lowest grade in a group of assignments
 - Additional review sessions for midterms and exams
 - Revised schedules to revisit class material at a later date
 - Optional attendance on some days and alternative ways to make up work
 - Options for community building in class
 - Reminder that if a student has a documented condition that is exacerbated by the stress of a student’s death, they should consult with the Office of Accessibility



See EAB’s [Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit](#) for [templates and sample trainings](#) to educate your campus community about the student death protocol.

Let Local Authorities Take the Lead in Family Notification



Pitfall #4: Notifying a family that their student died instead of working with local authorities to do so.

Leaders frequently assume that staff know how to handle sensitive information and rely on untrained staff members to deliver news of a student's death to the family. This incorrect assumption risks harm to the institution's relationship with the family. Early conversations between untrained staff and the family often focus on topics staff members do not yet have the answers to such as the cause of death. This practice can delay the family's grieving process and compromise staff well-being by asking them to respond to scenarios they are not trained for.



Recommendation: Focus on following up with the family after the initial notification to support the family's healing and grieving process.

Prioritizing the follow-up to the initial death notification allows campus leaders to focus time on pieces with which they *can* assist such as sharing condolences and supporting healing efforts.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:



Work with local community authorities to notify the family about a student's death.



Designate a family liaison and offer them training to effectively share condolences and facilitate the family's healing.

- Choose your family liaison.
- Create resources (e.g., scripting, role-playing conversations) to guide the family liaison's initial conversation with the family.
- Clarify additional touchpoints to ensure the family liaison is prepared to continue supporting the family.

Focus on the Family's Ongoing Grieving Process

▶ **Work with local community authorities (law enforcement and hospital workers) to notify the family about a student's death.**

This is important for the family's healthy grieving process and allows leaders to focus time on pieces with which they are equipped to help (e.g., sharing condolences and healing efforts). EAB interviewees note how law enforcement and hospital staff are better positioned to handle the initial death notification because their staff has been trained on how to deliver this type of news and navigate the shock families may feel upon receiving the notification. Institutions, on the other hand, are better positioned to support the family's ongoing grieving and adjustment process. Even if the death occurs on campus, work with law enforcement, hospital staff, and/or the coroner to notify the family before an institutional representative reaches out to share condolences.

▶ **Designate a family liaison and offer them training to effectively share condolences and facilitate the family's healing.**



Choose your family liaison.

There are two common approaches for choosing a family liaison:

1. Some institutions have the same person serve as the family liaison for all student deaths. Typically, this person is a member of the core response team or has a background in pastoral care. Most often, the VP SA, Dean of Students, or campus chaplain serves in this capacity.
2. The second approach is to choose someone who makes sense for that student or family situation (e.g., someone who speaks the same native language, a faculty or staff advisor, program advisor for a doctoral student).



Create resources (e.g., scripting, role-playing conversations) to guide the family liaison's initial conversation with the family.

The first conversation with the deceased's family is one of the most difficult parts of the family liaison's role. Leaders need to prioritize this conversation because whether or not the family consents to sharing information about the death will guide the rest of the institution's response process. Given the intense emotional nature of this conversation, it can be hard for the family liaison to maintain a compassionate approach and get the information they need. Create and share scripting with the family liaison to support them during this conversation and offer the option to role play this conversation with a student affairs leader. Focus your scripting on these four objectives:

- To share condolences on behalf of the institution
- To establish yourself as the main point of contact
- To ask for consent on communicating about the death
- To determine a time when you will follow up with more resources

Make this call after you have confirmed with local authorities that the family has been notified. Wait until 72 hours later for a follow up call. Until that point, families are still working to process and understand what the death means. Families rarely remember any information or details shared with them during the first 24 hours.

Focus on the Family's Ongoing Grieving Process, cont.

► Designate a family liaison and offer them training to effectively share condolences and facilitate the family's healing, cont.



Clarify additional touchpoints to ensure the family liaison is prepared to continue supporting the family.

- Most families reach out to the institution 2-3 days after their initial conversation with questions about closing the student's account and coordinating the return of the student's belongings.
- Prepare and share resources with the liaison about student insurance benefits, institutional administrative procedures, options for memorialization practices, and other supports so they can answer the family's questions.
- The family liaison may also coordinate sending any cards or gifts from the campus community.
- Consider how you may contact and support the family around key milestones, such as the anniversary of the death, the deceased's birthday, graduation date, and other major ceremonies.
- Reach consensus on a posthumous degree policy ahead of time. It is meaningful for many families to have something from the institution to recognize the student's contributions. One way to do this is through posthumous degrees. Work with key campus stakeholders (academic affairs leaders, faculty senate, etc.) to establish eligibility criteria for a posthumous degree, including academic standing and course completion status. Consider alternate options (e.g., certificate of attendance) for ineligible students. If possible, make a certificate that strongly resembles a diploma.



See EAB's [Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit](#) for a [sample timeline](#) for the family liaison and [posthumous degree policies](#).

Prioritize Well-Being in Your Notification Practices



Pitfall #5: Notifying the entire campus community with the same uniform message after every student death.

The decision whether to notify all faculty, staff, and students of each campus death and how to notify them has major implications for campus well-being and institutional reputation. In the event of a death by suicide or overdose, this notification may be especially problematic for students with a history of suicidal ideation. Notifications should be informative, recognize students' lived experiences, and focused on resource sharing. Even though most leaders describe communication as the biggest challenge in responding to a student death, they seldom specify if they prefer universal or targeted communication in their student death protocol.

Leaders often debate between these two notification practices: **universal notification and targeted notification.**



Universal notification is when the president, VPSA, or Dean of Students sends a notification to all faculty, staff, and students that a student has died. Universal notification of a student death may be appropriate when the safety and well-being of the vast majority of students, faculty, and staff have been compromised, such as mass violence or very public incidents.



Targeted notification is the practice of only alerting students, faculty, and staff who were connected to the deceased and have some utility to having this information, such as their roommates, classmates, friends, and colleagues in student groups.

While it may seem that informing the entire campus community that a student has died helps dispel rumors and is a form of transparency, institutions whose typical approach is to notify the entire campus risk causing undue distress for impacted students. One student described how triggering campus-wide email notifications were: "The semester before COVID hit, I can clearly remember getting at least one email a week, sometimes more, for a period of probably 4 weeks in a row (however it did happen all semester long). These emails had an unintentional chain effect. The last thing that a suicidal person needs to be reading is an email that in their mind is basically an affirmation of their plans."



Recommendation: Make targeted notification your default practice and draft notification scripts in advance to mobilize resources quickly and avoid omitting key information in the heat of the moment.

Avoid causing and exacerbating unintended psychological distress as you communicate with students, faculty, and staff about the death by not sending universal notifications. Only send universal notifications in extreme circumstances that have far-reaching impacts on campus.

When you notify impacted students, faculty, and staff that a student has died, having drafted notification templates ahead of time ensures that no key information is missed in the heat of the moment. Create audience-specific scripting so that you can mobilize a comprehensive list of resources quickly.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:



Make targeted notification your default practice.



Draft audience-specific notification templates ahead of time to ensure all key information is included.

Opt for Targeted Notification

► Make targeted notification your default practice.

EAB recommends using a targeted notification approach in most circumstances. Leaders who opt for targeted communication do so to mobilize support resources to the most impacted students efficiently and to mitigate distress for students who did not know the deceased and those who may be triggered by the death. Institutions who have switched from universal notification for all student deaths to a default approach of targeted notification report little to no pushback and positive returns on well-being.

“

“Given the potentially triggering and traumatizing impact that news of a student death can have, we need to mindfully balance that some students may need to know about the death, against the fact that others do not need to know – all while recognizing that sharing such news contributes to additional trauma, creating unintended psychological distress and harm.”

Luoluo Hong, Vice President for Student Engagement and Well-Being
Georgia Institute of Technology

”

If you are transitioning from a universal notification to a targeted notification protocol, take these steps to mitigate initial pushback from the campus community:

- Prepare thoughtful scripting around the intention and impact of this shift to share with faculty, staff, and students
- Proactively work with key campus groups (e.g., student newspaper, faculty senate, Deans) to raise awareness of how targeted notification will best serve campus well-being and the wishes of the deceased’s family
- Raise awareness of key response team stakeholders (senior leadership and core response team members) through training
- Proactively establish a plan and criteria for response team members to identify and prioritize notifying the most impacted campus community members
- Meet with dissenting community members 1:1 to answer their questions and connect them with individualized support
- Create bespoke notification templates for different audiences with room for customization ahead of time

Create Notification Scripts in Advance

► Draft audience-specific notification templates ahead of time to ensure all key information is included.

Leaders face pressure to communicate quickly and often without complete information in the immediate aftermath of a student death. It is important to communicate accurate information in a timely manner to promote campus well-being. However, without previously established guidelines, it is easy to overshare, run afoul of the family's wishes, or even violate privacy laws, and it can take days to draft and get approval for communications around student death. Create notification templates ahead of time to ensure that no key information is missed in the heat of the moment.

The primary goal of these communications is to provide care for and support for those being notified by highlighting available resources. Include a comprehensive list of support resources in your notification scripts. Tailor information so that each template is bespoke for campus stakeholders (e.g., highlight faculty and staff resources such as your EAP in the message to faculty).

Questions to Consider as You Draft Death Notifications

- Who is best suited to deliver these notifications?
- When and how will you deliver these messages (e.g., in person during class, with student groups, or via email/written communication)?
- What information will you share about the student and/or the death?
- What resources do you want to highlight for impacted community members?

You may need to flex the content for each death based on what information is known, privacy laws, and the desires of the affected family. The circumstances of the death, including ongoing inquiries by law enforcement, news media, and/or health authorities, will dictate what information can be shared.



Be sure to get your counsel's approval on the communication templates before sending them.



See EAB's **Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit** for a [checklist to identify impacted groups](#) and [sample notification scripting](#).

Promote Healthy Grieving and Resilience



Pitfall #6: Assuming canceling classes and mandated debriefs are the best way to provide space for students, faculty, and staff to heal.

We heard in our research that leaders frequently experience immense pressure to cancel all classes in the wake of a student death. However, not canceling classes is best practice in most circumstances. Grief experts argue that maintaining normal routines, like going to class, promotes healthy grieving and builds resilience. Resilience is "the ability of adults who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning" (Bonanno, 1994). This is especially important for college-aged students, many of whom are first-time grievers.



Recommendation: Prioritize the return to normal function and use trauma-informed practices to facilitate grieving and processing.

Consider how your decision to cancel classes helps or hinders students' resilience. EAB does not recommend canceling classes except in extreme cases. In most circumstances, leaders make the appropriate call by not canceling classes and opting instead for individualized accommodations (e.g., bereavement leave) in the event of a student death.

Regardless of whether you cancel classes, host optional support sessions that educate impacted individuals about grief and available resources. It is important that these sessions are not mandatory as the impact of the loss may differ from person to person and can show up in different ways over time.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:

- ▶ Identify if there are extreme circumstances that may make it appropriate to cancel classes.
- ▶ Instead of mandated debrief meetings, host optional group support sessions that focus on psychoeducation, emphasize self-care, and minimize additional impact.

Prioritize Well-Being When Deciding to Cancel Classes

► Identify if there are extreme circumstances that may make it appropriate to cancel classes.

“

“It’s easy to sit in the mess of stress and worry. Having an outlet and focus is actually very helpful and therapeutic – it diverts energy and sadness into something else.”

Blaine Eckles, Vice Provost for Student Affairs and Dean of Students
University of Idaho

”

EAB does not recommend canceling classes in most cases. Assess whether there are circumstances that make it appropriate to cancel classes.

In most instances, leaders are making the right decisions about returning to classes. However, their failure to justify this decision to students, faculty, and staff can come across as insensitive and uncaring. When announcing the decision not to cancel class, be sure to include the benefits of returning to classes (e.g., “Your classes are an opportunity to come together for reflection and connection”). Give students the choice to attend classes or to use that time to access other well-being resources. Keep in mind that some students do not have a home to go to in the event of canceled classes.

If you do elect to cancel classes, provide alternative programming that focuses on community gathering, reflection and processing, and connection to support. All programming should be optional and emphasize psychoeducation on grief.

“It is never about a choice to cancel classes and do nothing. It’s about what other activities may better support students, faculty, and staff in processing and grieving the death.”

*Robin Holmes-Sullivan, President
Lewis & Clark College*

Offer Self-Care Sessions to Promote Healthy Grieving

► **Instead of mandated debrief meetings, host optional group support sessions that focus on psychoeducation, emphasize self-care, and minimize additional impact**

Some institutions offer, and even mandate, loosely facilitated debriefing sessions as a way for students, faculty, and staff to discuss their experiences and normalize grieving. However, there is little empirical evidence to support psychological debriefing's effectiveness, according to the World Health Organization (2012). Studies show these well-intentioned sessions can do more harm than good—when people gather in large groups to talk about how they are impacted, it often creates more heightened emotions and can trigger feelings of guilt and anxiety among students. This practice delays recovery rather than promotes it and can result in vicarious trauma among participants.

“Worse than merely being ineffective, debriefing can be harmful for some people and may increase the risk of PTSD. The group of trauma survivors that are most vulnerable to the toxic effects of debriefing are those who are most distressed in the acute phase right after the trauma. This group of people have worse mental health outcomes if they are provided with early debriefing.”

*Dr. Richard Bryant
University of New South Wales Sydney*

Instead of these debriefing sessions, the University of Colorado Boulder hosts optional single sessions focused on the psychoeducation of grief. These sessions can be led by any campus leader, not just those with clinical or pastoral care backgrounds. Educate community members that the impact of a death or other crisis can vary from person to person and provide referrals to support resources. Structure the sessions to limit conversation around graphic details and personal experiences. Prepare session leaders to provide referrals to follow-up resources such as individual counseling as needed. Individual counseling is a more effective way to support in-depth, emotional responses for these types of situations.



See EAB's [Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit](#) for a [class cancellation decision guide](#) and an [outline for leading a group support session](#).

Ensure Consistent and Equitable Memorial Practices



Pitfall #7: Taking a bespoke approach to memorials for each student death.

In an effort to honor each student's life and to meet the requests of grieving community members, institutions often tailor memorials to individual student deaths. However, hosting different-in-kind memorials for every death can result in the perception that the institution values some students' lives more than others.



Recommendation: Establish guidelines for institution-sponsored memorials to ensure consistency and equity in your institutional response to student death.

Institutions who do so have more equitable and consistent responses to student deaths, can be flexible when appropriate, and keep student well-being at the center of their work.

Action Items to Avoid This Pitfall:

- ▶ Host collective commemoration for all deceased community members to mitigate equity concerns in how you memorialize deceased students.
 - Determine which collective memorials, if any, are appropriate for your institution.
 - Anticipate that individual student groups will want to host small-scale memorial activities and determine in advance how you will support them.
 - Create guidelines to limit spontaneous memorials.


- ▶ Identify opportunities to engage students in the planning and implementation process.


- ▶ Ensure campus leaders, faculty, and staff are aware of the guidelines.

Use Collective Remembrance to Mitigate Equity Concerns

▶ Host collective commemoration for all deceased community members to mitigate equity concerns in how you memorialize deceased students.

To ensure consistency and create space to grieve, many institutions opt to collectively commemorate all deceased members of the campus community each year via these two methods:

 **Annual remembrance events** are synchronous opportunities for the campus community to memorialize those lost across the past year. Establishing an annual event sets the expectation that the institution will honor deceased community members from the past year, each year. Institutions can choose to include deceased students, faculty, staff, former faculty and staff, and alumni. These events also help students establish norms about what healthy grieving can look like in practice.

 **Renewable memorial spaces** are typically structures on campus that honor lost members of the campus community and can be accessed throughout the year. A common example of a renewable memorial space is a memory garden that offers students, faculty, and staff a dedicated space for reflection and can be used to commemorate all campus community members as well as other loved ones.



Determine which collective memorials, if any are appropriate for your institution to ensure consistency.

Then, codify these practices and guidelines in writing.



Anticipate that individual student groups will want to host small-scale memorial activities and determine in advance how you will support them.

Student groups will want to host small group events (e.g., candlelight vigil, community service activity) to commemorate their deceased peers in addition to any institution-wide memorials. Determine in advance how you will support those students to perform safely and codify that in writing. Examples include helping students reserve a campus event space and connecting a student group with a local organization for community service.



Create guidelines to limit spontaneous memorials.

Leaving spontaneous memorials in place for too long prevents the community from reacclimating to normal function. Create a time limit for how long you will leave spontaneous memorials standing and plan how you will handle any non-perishable items (e.g., cards, photos, notes). Suicide prevention experts recommend a time limit of 3-5 days to take down any flowers, cards, or posters that appear on campus. Put up a sign next to the memorial saying that they will collect items at a certain date (typically at the end of that week) and what they plan to do with those items (e.g., send them to the family).

Involve Students in Designing Memorials

► Identify opportunities to engage students in the planning and implementation process.

EAB recommends that institutions offer students the opportunity to engage in planning and implementing memorials to help them process and grieve the death for both small group and institution-wide activities. Giving students agency in planning and implementing memorial activities helps them express and cope with difficult feelings and to draw on the support of peers and adults in the institutional community. Designate a staff facilitator (often the Dean of Students or Campus Chaplain) to guide students through the planning and implementation process.

Institutional Examples



[Access the webpage](#)

► **Raven's Call**

The Orange Keys student group plans and hosts Raven's Call, their annual community remembrance event. A student even designed and created a shadow box where families of deceased community members place a rose during the ceremony.



[Access the webpage](#)

► **Vandal Healing and Memorial Garden**

Students at the University of Idaho are pivotal to the design of the Vandal Healing and Memorial Garden. In addition to the interdisciplinary committee, who created a budget and framework for the garden, landscape design and architecture students drafted concepts of the garden in their courses.

See the [Preparing to Navigate Student Death toolkit](#) (p. 40) for more information about these examples.

Share Information About Memorials with Faculty and Staff

► Ensure campus leaders, faculty, and staff are aware of the guidelines.

As you create and enact the policy, connect with stakeholders to ensure consistent implementation across campus. Focus your efforts on advancement, athletics, and faculty and staff.

1

Advancement

Educate advancement officers about fundraising and memorial scholarships based on your guidelines. Consider maintenance costs, cultural norms, management of initial donations, and how long the memorial will be kept in place if you choose a semi-permanent memorial. In the event of mass violence, an institution may receive donations from the public. Plan in advance how to use that type of funding. Some institutions may opt to build a memorial garden or other reflection space on campus. If you elect to create a memorial space, be sure it will honor all deceased students or community members.

2

Faculty and Staff

When faculty and staff are unaware of the guidelines, they may promise students to help host a memorial that does not align with institutional guidelines. Students can become hostile and question if the institution actually cares about their well-being if the memorial cannot be implemented as promised. To center student well-being and avoid potential flashpoints, outline what memorialization options are available and the memorial facilitator's contact information in your student death resources for faculty and staff.

3

Athletics

Athletics leadership is often left out of traditional communication about student deaths. However, student athlete deaths tend to be more heavily publicized, and teams often host public memorial events during games or competitions. If an institution memorializes student athletes differently than other students, this leads to the perception that the student athlete's life was more valuable than another student.

The deceased's team may want to memorialize their teammate. Prioritize team healing in the wake of a student athlete's death and educate the athletics director and coach on what is and is not feasible based on your guidelines. Encourage team-specific memorial activities.



See EAB's [Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit](#) for a [memorialization guidelines editing checklist](#) and [community remembrance examples](#).

Conclusion and Next Steps

Prepare your institution for student death in advance so you can promote campus well-being and prioritize consistency and timeliness in your response. This will help you mitigate risks to student, faculty, and staff safety and avoid flashpoints. To ensure your institution's readiness for student death, Student Affairs leaders must prepare now so they can avoid the pitfalls discussed in this whitepaper:

- 1** Having no formal protocol or having a protocol that is overly focused on administrative tasks.
- 2** Waiting until a student death occurs to pull together the core response team.
- 3** Assuming faculty, staff, and student leaders are aware of and know how to use the student death protocol.
- 4** Notifying a family that their student died instead of working with local authorities to do so.
- 5** Notifying the entire campus community using the same uniform message after every student death.
- 6** Assuming canceling classes is the best way to provide space for students, faculty, and staff to heal.
- 7** Taking a bespoke approach to memorials for each student death.

To begin taking action on your campus, start by reviewing the [Preparing to Navigate Student Death Toolkit](#). For additional guidance on student mental health support, visit EAB's [Mental Health Resource Center](#).



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ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.