

A circular inset image on the left side of the page. It shows a close-up of a person's hand holding a single white rose. The hand is positioned next to a dark grey, rectangular stone monument, likely a gravestone. The background is a soft-focus green and yellow, suggesting an outdoor setting like a cemetery or garden.

**Checklist**

# Responding to a Student Death

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*Few campus events are as tragic and as difficult to handle as a student's death. According to one study, approximately 9,000 college students die each year in the U.S., an average of almost three per institution. Responding successfully to these distressing situations requires administrators to strike the right balance of empathy and professionalism. United Educators (UE) calls this balance the Cool Head, Warm Heart® approach. Using it, an institution can promote healing and trust by students, staff, and next of kin. However, a poorly executed reaction to a student's death can damage the institution's reputation, fuel litigation, and divide the campus.*

The unique circumstances of each death — self-inflicted, criminal, natural causes — may prompt differences in the institution's response. Campus administrators should use this checklist for guidance on how to consistently react with compassion.

For each item in the checklist, check the appropriate box (“Yes” or “No”) and note any additional needed actions in the space to the right.

## The Framework

## Actions Needed

A student’s death touches many people on and off campus. Before a death occurs, use the following outline to guide preparatory actions for a coordinated response.

### A. Policies and training

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|---|---|
| <b>1. Create a multidisciplinary emergency response team to handle student deaths or other types of campus emergencies.</b><br><i>(Refer to item 24 for suggestions of whom to include on this team.)</i>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <b>2. Create a policy, list of procedures, or checklist addressing actions for handling a student’s death, such as:</b>   |   |
| • Responsibilities of campus administrators   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| • Campus and family notification procedures   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| • Campus and family outreach  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| • Media relations   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| • Memorials   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <b>3. Train emergency team members or similar personnel on the institution’s procedures by conducting tabletop exercises of different student death situations.</b>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <b>4. Develop a crisis communications plan that addresses how to communicate with different audiences about student death situations.</b>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <b>5. Instruct the institution’s public relations or counseling staff to train local media outlets on ways to cover a student suicide to minimize the risk of copycat deaths.</b> <i>(See the Resources section for media guidelines on reporting on suicides.)</i> | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <b>6. Conduct debriefings with those who handle student deaths or similar crises to identify areas for improvement.</b>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |

## B. Campus notification

To ensure relevant campus departments receive timely information about a student's death:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 7. Determine which personnel or departments will immediately be notified of a student's death.<br><i>(See item 24 for suggestions of whom to contact immediately.)</i>                                   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 8. Articulate the role of campus law enforcement in an on-campus death so they know which campus personnel to contact and keep informed of the situation.  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 9. Build relationships with local public service providers such as the police and fire departments, coroner's office, and hospitals so they know how to contact the institution about a student's death. | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 10. Determine who at the institution will prepare the campus death notification to ensure proper closure of records.   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 11. Identify which departments will receive the death notification.  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |

## C. Family notification

To make sure the deceased's family is treated with compassion through this very difficult time:

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|--|---|
| 12. Designate liaisons — usually with a student affairs or counseling background — to serve as primary points of contact between the institution and the family.   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 13. Train these family liaisons on:  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The grieving process through grief educators and counselors, family survivors of a student death, or other resources</li> </ul>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to notify the family; the training should cover a variety of formats, such as on the phone and in person <i>(Consider creating a script or practicing notification scenarios with potential liaisons.)</i></li> </ul> | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to handle the family's visit to the campus</li> </ul>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Important death-related information such as:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How death certificates are issued</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transporting a body across state lines or to a foreign country</li> </ul>   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The locations of area morgues</li> </ul>  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |

- Tuition refunds  Yes  
 No

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- Granting posthumous degrees  Yes  
 No

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- Packing the deceased's belongings  Yes  
 No

## D. Helpful documents

Prepare or provide:

14. A list of local funeral homes and houses of worship in case the family wishes to have a local service  Yes  
 No
- 
15. A list of people knowledgeable about the different religious and cultural practices reflected in the student body with whom the institution can consult  Yes  
 No
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16. Information on potential memorials, such as:
- How to make a donation for a memorial  Yes  
 No

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  - How to create a scholarship or an endowment  Yes  
 No

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  - Procedures for naming buildings or sites on campus after a student  Yes  
 No
- 
17. Information about claiming a body and personal belongings, obtaining death certificates, closing bank and utility accounts, filing a tax return, and obtaining death-related benefits if the student was an eligible employee of the institution  Yes  
 No
- 
18. A compilation of books on grieving the death of a loved one, including books that specifically address suicide and crimes (*See the Resources section for suggested books on grieving*)  Yes  
 No

# The Response

## Actions Needed

Upon learning of a student's death, administrators must tend to a variety of considerations, including verifying information, making notifications, supporting the deceased's family and the campus community, and planning memorials.

### E. Gathering and communicating information

#### 19. Verify the following information about the deceased student:

*(For more information, refer to items 27 and 31.)*

• Name	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Address	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Birth date	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Student identification number	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Student's marital status	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Student's close friends	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Location and cause of death (if possible)	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Location of the body and personal possessions	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Culture or religion	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Student's nationality	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Affiliation with athletics, student clubs, or organizations	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Whether the student is an employee of the institution	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Enrollment at your institution of student's siblings or relatives	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
• Marital status of the student's parents	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

20. If the death was off-campus, send someone to the site to gather information directly.  Yes  No
- 
21. Convene the crisis communications team or consult with public relations professionals to determine how and when to communicate information about the death.  Yes  No

**F. Notifications**

22. Make sure the family has been officially notified of the death.  Yes  No
- 
23. Designate a liaison from the institution to contact the family. *(Please refer to the next section, “Supporting the family,” for additional resources.)*  Yes  No
- 
24. Notify the emergency response team or relevant campus departments such as:
- Dean of Students  Yes  No

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  - Registrar *(To prevent inappropriate mailings to the deceased’s family, many institutions use the registrar’s office as the new address of the deceased student.)*  Yes  No

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  - Provost or academic department to which the student belonged  Yes  No

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  - Housing  Yes  No

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  - Counseling  Yes  No

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  - Law enforcement  Yes  No

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  - Risk Management or general counsel *(The death may involve liability concerns or trigger reporting obligations to the institution’s insurers.)*  Yes  No

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  - Communications or Public Affairs  Yes  No

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  - Finance or business officer  Yes  No

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  - Religious advisors or leaders (if applicable)  Yes  No

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  - International or Foreign Student’s Office (if applicable)  Yes  No

25. Prepare the campus death notification and send it to the appropriate offices.  Yes  No
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26. If the deceased is international, ask students from the same country to refrain from calling their own families about the death until the deceased's family has been notified.  Yes  No
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**G. Supporting the family**

27. Make sure the institution's designated liaison records information relevant to the deceased's family, including: *(Such record keeping is particularly important when there have been multiple deaths.)*
- Names of the family members  Yes  No

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  - Contact information for family and friends  Yes  No

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28. To ensure the family is treated compassionately during their visit to campus:
- Consult with applicable religious or cultural advisors about any special considerations.  Yes  No

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  - Offer to make travel arrangements and meet them when they arrive.  Yes  No

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  - Offer to pay for their travel.  Yes  No

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  - Contact the institution's risk manager or financial officer to see if there are funds or insurance that will cover some of the family's potential expenses, including the costs of repatriating a body if the student is international.  Yes  No

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  - Offer to assist the family on campus if they do not know their way around.  Yes  No

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  - Provide a contact sheet with all necessary phone numbers and campus and city maps.  Yes  No

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  - Provide access to convenient parking by issuing them a special permit.  Yes  No

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  - Offer them counseling or a meeting with a religious advisor.  Yes  No

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  - Provide a quiet meeting place on campus that is shielded from the media.  Yes  No

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  - Provide beverages, food, notebooks, and pens in the campus meeting place.  Yes  No

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- Offer them helpful documents, such as:
  - Information on death-related details and tasks  
(Please refer to item 17.)  Yes  
 No

- Books on grieving (Please refer to item 18.)  Yes  
 No

- Offer to arrange contact with the deceased’s instructors  Yes  
 No

**29. Offer to reimburse the family for tuition (when possible).**  Yes  
 No

**30. Provide the family with options for removing the student’s belongings, such as:**

- Arrange a convenient time for the family to remove the belongings or work with the student’s landlord to do so, and consider providing packing supplies for the family, such as boxes, bubble wrap, and markers.  Yes  
 No

- Offer to store or pack the student’s belongings.  Yes  
 No

**31. Maintain contact with the family by periodically checking in, offering support, or taking measures to acknowledge the anniversary of the death.**  Yes  
 No

## H. Supporting the campus community

**32. Seek out those on campus who were close to the deceased, such as friends, roommates, teammates, siblings, or resident assistant to:**

- Offer counseling and provide information.  Yes  
 No

- Generate absence notifications.  Yes  
 No

- Work with their instructors to complete assignments or assist with incompletes and withdrawals.  Yes  
 No

- Have counseling or a campus religious advisor periodically check in on those individuals.  Yes  
 No

**33. If the student lived *off campus*, work with the landlord or management company to relocate roommates if requested.**  Yes  
 No

**34. If the student lived *on campus*, offer to move anyone who lived with or near the deceased.**  Yes  
 No

**35. Be sure to:**

- Meet with residence advisors to update them on the situation and to offer guidance on helping students obtain counseling, watching for signs of student distress, and approaching a student in need.  Yes  
 No

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- Offer counseling to students, staff, faculty, and co-workers, if the student was an employee.  Yes  
 No

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- Place counselors or therapy dogs in campus locations frequented by students, such as in residence halls or libraries, to facilitate discussion and healing.  Yes  
 No

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- Designate someone to attend all classes that the deceased was enrolled in to offer help or provide information about the death.  Yes  
 No

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- Send condolence letters to all instructors of the deceased.  Yes  
 No

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- Cancel campus events that seem inappropriate in light of the death.  Yes  
 No

**I. Memorials**

**36. In planning for a memorial, consider the following actions:**

- Involving the family in the choice of a place for the service  Yes  
 No

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- Excusing students from class for the service  Yes  
 No

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- Providing transportation to and from the service  Yes  
 No

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- Accommodating cultural and religious customs  Yes  
 No

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- Involving the deceased’s friends and instructors in the service  Yes  
 No

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- Obtaining a translator if the deceased is international  Yes  
 No

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- Involving the institution’s choir or other musicians  Yes  
 No

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- Providing the family with a memory book or video of the service  Yes  
 No

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- Having a member of campus leadership attend  Yes  
 No

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- Providing security  Yes  
 No

## Actions Needed

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|---|---|
| 37. Preserve physical memorials left in remembrance of the deceased and offer to send them to the deceased's family.                            | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 38. Offer a flag lowering ceremony or a private catered reception for close family and friends.   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |
| 39. Try to remain consistent with the memorial services held for each student to avoid suggesting that one life is more important than another. | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No |

*By Alyssa Keehan, Esq., CPCU, ARM, Director of Risk Management Research & Consulting. Alyssa oversees the development of UE's risk management content and consulting initiatives, ensuring reliable and trustworthy guidance for our members. Her areas of expertise include campus sexual misconduct, Title IX, threat assessment, campus security, contracts, and risk transfer. She previously handled UE liability claims and held positions in the fields of education and insurance.*



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