



Supporting Campus Communities After the Death of a Student: The Facts

Zoe J. Hayes, M.S.

How Should the Campus Community Respond Following the Death of a Student?

The death of a student can have significant effects on the campus community, particularly in residential settings where friends, roommates, faculty, and staff may have close connections to the deceased. Student death can result from illness, accidents, violence, suicide, or other unexpected circumstances [9]. When student deaths result from violence, suicide, or other traumatic events, the impact can be especially impactful, as secondary victims may experience significant grief, psychological distress, and, in some cases, heightened fear about their own safety and well-being. A university's response to campus deaths should include a coordinated strategy involving psychological first aid, community postvention, staff training, and ongoing bereavement support [6]. These coordinated responses can be conceptualized as death response plans (DRP) or death response team (DRT), which provide a structured approach for coordinating institutional resources and support services following a student death [3]. Although colleges and universities may view student death as uncommon events, available data indicates that campus communities are regularly affected by student loss, highlighting the need for proactive planning and coordinated response efforts [2,3,6].

Have You Heard?

- A multi-institutional survey of 157 four-year colleges documented a total of 254 student deaths during one academic year, including deaths from accidental injuries, suicide, cancer, and homicide [9].
- The tragic 1999 Texas A&M University bonfire collapse, which killed 12 students and injured 27 others, prompted changes in university crisis response and risk-management practices, while increasing awareness about preventing similar campus tragedies [8].
- Students who experienced the death of a university classmate reported having a greater appreciation of life, a realization of the fragility of life, fear of the unknown, a stronger sense of community, and immediate and long-term grief needs [7].

What Are the Consequences?

A student death can affect the broader campus community by disrupting academic routines, altering student's sense of safety and community, and creating immediate demands for coordinated institutional support [8]. Experiencing bereavement in higher education has been associated with adverse health outcomes, poorer academic performance, social withdrawal, and increased risk of attrition [1,5,4].

How to Raise Awareness and Support the Campus Community:

One approach to strengthening campus support following a student death is establishment and development of Actively Moving Forward (AMF) campus chapters. AMF uses a peer-led model in which grieving students can connect with peers who have experienced loss, with the support of university faculty or staff advisors [5]. Training administrators, student affairs professionals, faculty, and staff can further increase awareness of grief-informed strategies and improve support and responses for bereaved students. In addition, universities can implement grief-informed programs; these interventions should be timely and provided when students are in need of assistance [2]. Combining peer-led support with coordinated institutional resources can help campuses address both immediate and ongoing needs following a student death.

Resources

Texas

- **Bo's Place (Young adult group)-** <https://bosplace.org/en/for-those-grieving/young-adult-groups/>
- **The WARM Place (Young adult group)-** <https://www.thewarmplace.org/services/grief-support-groups/>
- **Mending Hearts Grief Center -** <https://mendinghearts.squarespace.com/grief-support>

National

- **Actively Moving Forward -** <https://healgrief.org/young-adult-grief/>
- **Coalition to Support Grieving College Students -** <https://grievingstudents.org>
- **National Alliance on Mental Health "If in Crisis" -** <https://namitexas.org/crisis-info/>

References

- [1] Balk, D. (2001). College student bereavement, scholarship, and the university: A call for university engagement. *Death Studies*, 25(1), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/074811801750058636>
- [2] Balk, D. E., Walker, A. C., & Baker, A. (2010). Prevalence and severity of college student bereavement examined in a randomly selected sample. *Death Studies*, 34(6), 459–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180903251810>
- [3] Cusick, A. (2008). University student death response plans using a structural management approach provide effective coordinated institutional action. *Death Studies*, 32(6), 550–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180802138902>
- [4] Glickman, K. (2021). Prolonged grief disorder in a diverse college student sample. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 604573. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.604573>
- [5] Liew, C. H., & Servaty-Seib, H. L. (2020). College students' feedback on a student bereavement leave policy. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 57(1), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1614940>
- [6] Streufert, B. (2004). Death on campuses: Common postvention strategies in higher education. *Death Studies*, 28(2), 151–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04781180490264745>
- [7] Thompson, W., Minor, L., & Gerlach, J. (2025). Undergraduate nursing student perceptions of the unexpected death of a classmate: A qualitative study. *Death Studies*, 49(6), 822–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2024.2361743>
- [8] Treadwell, K. L., Lane, F. C., & Paterson, B. G. (2020). Reflections from crisis: A phenomenological study of the Texas A&M bonfire collapse. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 57(2), 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1614939>
- [9] Turner, J. C., Leno, E. V., & Keller, A. (2013). Causes of mortality among American college students: A pilot study. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 27(1), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2013.739022>

Texas State University System Board of Regents

Stephen Lee
Chairman
Bastrop

Tom Long
Vice Chairman
Dallas

Charlie Amato
Regent
San Antonio

Duke Austin
Regent
Houston

Sheila Faske
Regent
Rose City

Russell Gordy
Regent
Houston

William F. Scott
Regent
Nederland

Alan L. Tinsley
Regent
Madisonville

**Johnny R.
Weisman**
Regent
New Braunfels

**Elizabeth Diaz
Arreola**
Student Regent
Beaumont

Resources

- Aging and Disability Resource Center 855-937-2372
- Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 844-878-2274
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving 877-623-3435
- National Child Abuse Hotline 800-422-4453
- National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-7233
- National Human Trafficking Hotline 888-373-7888
- National Sexual Assault Hotline 800-656-4673
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 988
- Texas Abuse Hotline 800-252-5400
- Texas Council on Family Violence <https://tcfv.org/survivor-resources/>
- Texas Association Against Sexual Assault <https://taasa.org/get-help/>
- Victim Connect Resource Center 855-484-2846
- Victims Of Immigration Crime Engagement (VOICE) 1-855-48-VOICE (1-855-488-6423)