

Dealing with a Death Abroad: Policies and Best Practices

While we hope that no international office ever has to manage the tragedy of the death of a student while abroad, a comprehensive risk management plan should include detailed information about how the institution would respond. This document aims to outline some of the high-level steps your institution should consider when creating your individual plan for dealing with a death abroad, whether it be a student, faculty, or staff member. At the end of the document, we also highlight some resources from across the field that could inform your planning and response.

Key elements to Include in your institution's protocol

- Know the key players for a death abroad – who is a part of your International Crisis Response Team? You may consider including:
 - Education Abroad
 - Student Affairs/Dean of Students
 - Housing and Residence Life
 - Counseling Center
 - Legal/General Counsel
 - Media/University Relations
 - University Risk Management
 - Campus Police
 - Human Resources (for faculty/staff)
 - Business/Finance contacts
 - Representative from travel agency (if used for program planning)
- Information and Documentation
 - Initial report to institution should include as much information as possible. Have a checklist of information that faculty (or whoever reports the incident) should gather.
 - Make a checklist for steps to take during immediate response, recognizing that each situation is unique.
 - Who needs to know first? Establish a first point of contact for international emergencies before program departure.
- Communications during a crisis
 - Do you have an on-campus death protocol?
 - Will you follow this same process in the event of a death abroad?
 - Can this be used as a template for a death abroad protocol?
 - Who will be included in initial response communications (outside of Crisis Response Team)?
 - President
 - Provost
 - Dean/chair of the deceased student/faculty member's department
- Communications with deceased's family
 - Designate a university staff member to reach out and work closely with family throughout the process
 - Coordinate with local U.S. Citizen Services (ACS) or local embassy/consulate for initial notification if possible and timely

- Note that circumstances may require deviation from standard on-campus death notification protocol (e.g. – the event may already have media coverage or be circulating on social media)
- Share instructions with students/participants on the program not to post anything on social media or share news before institution
- Logistics
 - Will a representative from your institution travel to the location – to help with carrying out program or other details?
 - Obtain death certificate (and translation, if applicable)
 - If student is on a third-party provider program, determine if other insurance coverage besides USG mandated coverage exists and work with colleague(s) regarding benefits
 - Discuss appropriate ways to express condolences to family - e.g. flowers, letters of sympathy, contributing to campus events in honor of student
 - Coordinate with family on their preferences to facilitate transfer of decedent’s belongings
 - Follow up with USG mandated insurance provider and communicate with family on when they can expect various things (e.g. repatriation, benefits payments, etc.)
 - If study abroad program is still in progress, will the program continue? Will the program and/or program director need additional support?
- Pastoral Care
 - Decide how your institution might offer to provide support for the decedent’s family
 - Assistance with travel to site
 - How to handle remains and any religious preferences
 - Designating specific family member as point of contact for logistics in immediate response
 - Ensure that the family receives no further communication from the institution regarding bills, etc.
 - Will the student be able to receive a posthumous degree? Does family want to receive the degree at commencement?
 - Will the President reach out to the family?
 - Decide how to provide counseling and support for other students on the study abroad program and peers on campus of the decedent
 - Decide how to notify peer groups and what support would be provided to those groups
 - How will the campus community acknowledge the student’s death? Will there be a memorial service, etc.?
 - Recognize the diverse responses of staff to the death and engage employee support to help staff either in group setting or individually.

Other Resources

[When A Student Dies Abroad](#) (International Educator publication)

[Crisis Management for Education Abroad](#) (NAFSA publication)

[Sample Emergency Response Plans](#) (NAFSA publication – must have NAFSA membership to access)