

UT Health Science Center:	
COM131 Death of a COM Student - COM Medical Education	
Version 2	Publication Date: 02/27/2026

No./Title: COM131/Death of a COM Student	Resp. Office: Medical Education Approval Body: CUME	Effective Date: 02/20/23
Category: COM/UME	Last Review: 01/12/26	Next Review: 01/12/29
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Related Policy: EM111 – Student Death Procedures		

POLICY

It is the policy of the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (UTHSC) College of Medicine (COM) that the administration will provide an orderly, effective, and caring response in the event of the death of a student.

RATIONALE AND PROCEDURE

When the death of a student occurs, it is the responsibility of the University and the COM to respond in a sensitive and appropriate manner, recognizing that individuals respond in different ways to different circumstances that may surround a death. It is recognized that the death of a student affects the entire University community, as well as the family and friends of the deceased.

The purpose of this Policy is to establish procedures that will support an orderly, effective, and caring response in the unfortunate event of a student death. Considering the very sensitive and unpredictable nature of a death, no policy or protocol can describe in complete detail all the steps that must be taken by the administration. This Policy sets forth guidelines to support communications and notifications in the event of a student death. Those responsible for implementing this Policy should be guided by the essential communication needs required in these situations, as well as by empathy, sensitivity, and support for the bereaved and the need to preserve important evidence in some instances.

1. Notification of Appropriate Campus Officials:

In most circumstances, local or campus police will be first responders when there is a death of a student, whether the death occurs on-campus or off-campus. As per policy EM111, law enforcement will first contact the UTHSC Executive Vice Chancellor/Chief Operations Officer and/or the ranking UTHSC official on site (e.g., in Nashville, Jackson, Knoxville or Chattanooga).

It is the medical examiner’s responsibility to notify the family in consultation with the campus Chief of Police/ranking local security officer about the death of a student. UTHSC officials may only contact a member of the deceased student’s family after the family has been notified by the medical examiner.

- a. Immediate Notifications – the following individuals or offices will be contacted immediately by the Executive Vice Chancellor & COO, or official on site after learning of a student death.

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1. UTHSC Chancellor
2. Executive Dean of the COM
3. Office of Communication and Marketing
4. Vice Chancellor of Academic, Faculty and Student Affairs (AFSA)*
5. Associate Dean of Student Affairs or DIO-Depending upon classification of the student
*Will serve as the primary campus contact for the family of the deceased student.

- b. Primary Notifications – the listed officials will contact the following individuals/offices as soon as possible, but only after the family has been notified.

Official's Title	Individual/Office to Contact
Executive Dean of the COM	Associate Dean of Student Affairs & Admissions Associate Dean of Medical Education DIO (Designated Institutional Official) Senior Associate Dean for Finance and Administration
Vice Chancellor of AFSA	Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Success (Student Affairs) Registrar Director of Financial Aid Bursar Student Academic Support Services and Inclusion (SASSI) Student Government Association (SGA) leadership

- c. Secondary Notifications – The Registrar will contact the following offices as soon as practical
1. Office of Financial Aid
 2. Office of the Bursar
 3. Information Technology Services Chief Information Officer
 4. Director of University Health Services (UHS)
 5. Parking Services

2. Family Communication

- a. The Vice Chancellor of AFSA (Academic, Faculty and Student Affairs) will serve as the primary campus contact for the family of the deceased student; however, at the discretion of the Vice Chancellor of AFSA, the COM Associate Dean of Student Affairs and/or a designee who is familiar with the situation may be assigned as the Primary Contact with the deceased student's family.
- b. The Primary Contact will serve as the single point of contact for family members who wish to speak with faculty, staff, or students concerning the death of their student. The following should be part of communication with the family.
 1. Offer condolences
 2. Inquire as to what the school can do to assist
 3. Ask them to identify the student's friends who may need assistance
 4. Discuss what students should be told

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5. Inquire about funeral arrangements
6. If possible, the primary campus contact should do this in person.
7. Inform family on process to forgive federal student loans.

3. Campus Notification

- a. Upon notification of a student death, Police and Public Safety will send out a timely Campus Safety Alert if it is determined there is an ongoing threat to the campus community.
- b. Other than the Campus Safety Alert (if any), the Vice Chancellor for AFSA or their designee, in collaboration with the Office of Communication and Marketing, and the Executive Dean of the COM will determine as soon as practical what notifications will be made to the COM students and the campus community at-large, and how those notifications will be communicated.
- c. Although the fact that a student has died may be disclosed immediately, official information about the cause of death should not be disclosed to students until the family has been consulted and consented to said disclosure. The need to share information should be carefully balanced with honoring the family's request. Therefore, the university may choose to initially release a more general, factual statement without using the student's name if the family does not give permission.

4. External Communication and Media

- a. All external media requests for information should be directed to Office of Communication and Marketing who will be responsible for collecting and disseminating information about a student death to the external media. The Office of Communication and Marketing will work with Police and Public Safety, the Vice Chancellor of AFSA, and the University Counsel to maintain the accuracy and ensure the legality of the information disseminated.
- b. Under Tennessee law, only a county medical examiner has authority to determine the cause and manner of a death that is not attended by medical personnel and other types of death, including but not limited to deaths that might reasonably have been due to a violent or traumatic injury or accident. Accordingly, no person involved in the University's response to a student death may speculate as to the cause of death or make statements assigning responsibility for the cause of death. Responses to requests for such information by the external media or others should indicate that the University will cooperate fully with the agencies and officials charged with investigating and determining the cause and circumstances of the death.

5. Support for Students

- a. In the aftermath of an accidental death or suicide, students may feel emotionally overwhelmed. This can increase the risk of prolonged stress responses and even suicide contagion. The Vice Chancellor for AFSA, or designee in the COM (e.g., the Associate Dean of Student Affairs) will work with the Office of Student Success to ensure all students have the emotional and mental health support needed. Opportunities for students to gather on campus should be provided by coordinating with the following individuals or groups:
 1. Medical Student Executive Council leadership
 2. Class President and Vice President

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APPROVAL HISTORY

Effective: 02/20/23

Revised: 01/12/26