



IMPLEMENTING A STUDENT BEREAVEMENT LEAVE POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: PART ONE

FEBRUARY 2026

EACH YEAR,
OVER 4 MILLION STUDENTS
IN HIGHER EDUCATION ARE
IMPACTED BY BEREAVEMENT,
AFFECTING THEM...



Cognitively



Interpersonally



Spiritually



Emotionally



Behaviorally

Without adequate bereavement support, many students experience unnecessary hardships that can lead to departure from higher education altogether.



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Foreword

The multi-part Higher Education Leave Plan (HELP) Toolkit, developed by an interdisciplinary team of students and professionals, addresses the critical issue of student bereavement in higher education. It provides resources and information for leaders to support bereaved students, offering evidence-based strategies and best practices to create a more compassionate campus environment for the bereaved.



The HELP Toolkit aims to assist higher education institutions in implementing bereavement policies, ensuring that grief doesn't become an insurmountable obstacle to academic success and overall well-being. Created by individuals with personal and professional experience with bereavement, it disseminates facts and resources to guide campuses through policy implementation.

The resource emphasizes that every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, even in the face of loss, and calls on higher education leaders to advocate for such support. By considering the recommendations herein, institutions can foster a supportive community for grieving students.

Part One provides a suggested structure for anyone contemplating the need for a student-specific bereavement leave policy. These elements are derived from models that have proven successful at campuses of varied size and affiliation nationwide.

The information herein should be adaptable for those seeking to establish student bereavement leave policies. We understand the need to consider each institution's own culture and practices as they develop policies. Therefore, we encourage reflection on how this content can be applied, given the unique nuances of each campus.

Thank you for advocating for this important issue. Implementing bereavement leave policies within a college community can make a marked difference in students' lives during a profound time of need. Please know that we are here to support you in your journey.

Sincerely,

The HELP Team at Evermore

Mission Statement & Objectives

Evermore is dedicated to making the world a more livable place for all bereaved people. We are changing policies and practices within our communities—and across our nation—so that all bereaved individuals can achieve a healthy and prosperous future.

HELP COMMITTEE'S OBJECTIVES

The Higher Education Leave Plan (HELP) Committee is enhancing the understanding of and support for all bereaved students across higher education contexts, including vocational and trade schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities throughout the nation. Our objectives are to:

- 1 Educate the academic community about the profound impacts of grief and bereavement on students' mental, emotional, and physical well-being and academic performance.
- 2 Advocate for comprehensive bereavement policies and accommodations that recognize the unique challenges faced by grieving students.
- 3 Facilitate connections between students, parents, faculty, administrators, and resources to ensure accessible, compassionate support is available to those navigating bereavement during their post-secondary educational journey.

Through our collaborative efforts, we strive to foster a more empathetic and responsive higher education environment for bereaved students and their families.

RECOMMENDED CITATION:

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Background



Grief significantly impacts college students, affecting academic performance, social well-being, and retention.^{1,2} Nearly 40% of students report losing a loved one within two years, yet most U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs)—including colleges, universities, trade and vocational schools, and community colleges—lack student bereavement leave policies.^{3,4,5} This oversight is particularly concerning given the co-occurrence of mortality epidemics in the United States and the discrete stressors that bereavement places on young adults.

Grieving students often experience decreased academic performance, lower exam scores, and reduced social well-being compared to non-grieving peers. Symptoms include lethargy, insomnia, social isolation, and difficulty concentrating, leading to lower GPAs, and, in some cases, departure from higher education altogether.^{6,7}

Institutional support can assist in mitigating these effects, helping students recover academically and fostering a long-term sense of belonging, which may result in more academic success. Bereavement leave policies are a low-cost intervention that supports academic success and student well-being, while acknowledging formative relationships—an approach that may ultimately foster alumni loyalty.

However, as of 2019, only 44 U.S. HEIs had student-specific bereavement policies.⁸ Ball State University pioneered such policies, followed by Purdue University's Grief Absence Policy for Students (GAPS), which was adopted in 2011. Despite these models, we estimate that fewer than 100 of over 3,900 degree-granting post secondary institutions in the U.S.³² offer student bereavement leave policies today.

To address this gap, Evermore's Higher Education Leave Plan (HELP) initiative provides a comprehensive toolkit to assist institutions in implementing bereavement policies. This effort aims to better support grieving students and demonstrate commitment to their well-being.

IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING Bereaved Students in Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are not just places of learning; they are also communities where students spend a significant portion of their formative years. It is imperative that these institutions recognize the importance of supporting students during times of bereavement. Grief can impact multiple domains of students' lives, including their physical, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development.^{9,10}

Access to bereavement leave allows students the necessary time and space to mourn and attend to the practical matters that accompany the loss of a loved one. It acknowledges the human aspect of bereavement while demonstrating compassion and empathy toward students, who may be facing consequential circumstances that can alter the trajectory of their life.

By implementing bereavement leave policies, higher education institutions can demonstrate their commitment to students' holistic well-being and foster a learning environment that supports achievement. It is not just a matter of good policy; it demonstrates respect, compassion, and dignity. Below is a summary of key reasons for adopting student bereavement leave policies.¹¹

CORE REASONS FOR STUDENT BEREAVEMENT POLICIES

- **Promotes Well-being:** Grieving is a natural process, and everyone copes with it differently. Having the flexibility to take time off from academic responsibilities can alleviate stress and prevent health, social, and economic declines.
- **Facilitates Academic Success:** Bereavement leave enables students to focus on their emotional well-being without the added pressure of meeting academic deadlines. This, in turn, can help prevent a decline in academic performance during a challenging period.
- **Fosters a Supportive Community:** Providing bereavement leave sends a powerful message that the higher education community cares about its students beyond their academic achievements. It fosters a culture of understanding a shared human experience, thereby strengthening the bond among students, faculty, and staff.

- **Helps Faculty:** Bereavement leave policies clarify expectations for both students and faculty, limiting uncertainty about accommodations for missed class time and work.
- **Encourages Healthy Coping Mechanisms:** Rushing back into academic responsibilities immediately after a loss can hinder the grieving process and attainment. Bereavement leave allows students the time to attend to administrative demands from the death, as well as seek support from family, friends, or counseling services, promoting healthier coping mechanisms.
- **Recognizes the Individuality of Grief:** Grief is a deeply personal experience influenced by cultural, religious, and familial factors. Access to bereavement leave acknowledges and respects the unique and individual nature of students' grief experiences, ensuring their needs are met with sensitivity and understanding.
- **Acknowledges the Impact of Grief on Cognition and Understanding:** A bereavement leave policy acknowledges the wide range of neurological impairments, such as cognitive fog, emotional dysregulation, and stress- related signs, that can arise after a loss, providing students with time to process grief without compromising their well-being or productivity.



Model Policy



The landscape of higher education encompasses a wide spectrum of institutions, from doctoral degree-granting research universities to highly specialized vocational schools. This variety in educational contexts significantly shapes the policies adopted on each campus. Recognizing the unique differences across higher education settings, we propose six key considerations for an effective, consistent student bereavement policy. These components have been adapted in whole or in part by higher education institutions of various sizes and affiliations – both large and small, public and private – across the United States. Nevertheless, campus leaders should intentionally consider how they can modify these components to best fit their particular institutional needs. Remember, any action taken is important and will make a material difference for students.

**Please see Part 2 of the HELP Toolkit for examples of policies and more.*

SIX KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Institution-wide Policy

- At institutions with enrollment over 10,000, there should be an institution-wide written and formally adopted policy embedded within the institution's academic regulations. At smaller schools, a formal faculty protocol may be sufficient.

2. Policy Administration

- A central unit or division should manage the policy.
- A clearly established administrative procedure for who will receive the submitted documentation, as well as appropriately organize and file it, should be established.

3. Academic Impact

- Excused absences should not affect a student's attendance record.
- Students should be given the opportunity to make up coursework as defined in a course's syllabus.
 - While this timeframe will vary by institution, the recommended time for submitting makeup work is 3 weeks.
 - These provisions also include granting leave even when a student does not physically travel from campus.

4. Define Family Member/Loved One:

- **A family member is broadly defined to include:** Immediate relatives: spouse, parents, children, siblings; extended family: grandparents, grandchildren; in-laws: parents-in-law; step-relations: step-parents, step-children; foster relationships: foster parents, foster children; legal guardians and wards; domestic partners, both same-sex and opposite-sex; relatives by marriage: spouses or domestic partners of all the above categories; blood relatives: any family member within the second degree of consanguinity (blood relation); relatives by marriage: any family member within the second degree of affinity (relation by marriage).¹²
 - *This definition encompasses a wide spectrum of familial connections, both biological and legal.*
- Additional considerations include service dogs, those serving *in loco parentis*, and other persons operating in caretaker roles.

5. Set Parameters for Allotment

- **Family:** Students are eligible for up to five days of excused absences over a two-week period immediately following their death loss, within the semester or quarter the death occurs, for the death of a spouse, parent, child, grandparent, grandchild, or sibling, or a corresponding in-law or step-relative.
 - *For clarity, this implementation refers to five full days, not five class periods. Therefore, the student is allowed five full days, regardless of what courses meet on those days. These five full days must be used within a two-week period of electing to use the policy.*
- **Other Relationships:** Students are eligible for up to three days of excused absences over a two-week period within the semester or quarter the death occurs for the death of relatives or friends falling outside of the second degree of consanguinity or affinity.
- Students should also be granted additional absences to account for travel considerations, which should be determined by the distance of the verified bereavement services from campus:
 - a. *Within a 150-mile radius - no additional excused absence days*
 - b. *Between 150-300 mile radius of campus - one additional excused absence day.*
 - c. *Beyond a 300-mile radius - two additional excused absence days.*
 - d. *Outside the 48 contiguous United States, four additional excused absence days.*

6. Validation of Death Protocol

- At larger schools, the main campus office in charge of the student bereavement leave policy should consider handling the process of soliciting and recording proof of death.
 - *Having documentation managed by a central unit relieves faculty from having to individually request proof of death. Moreover, grief and bereavement may not be the area of expertise for individual faculty members, allowing for someone at the central unit with training and/or experience in this area to make such a sensitive request.*
 - *Institutions with lower enrollment may not need such a provision.*

* Additional Considerations

- **Non-consecutive usage of days:** Students can elect to use days as needed, rather than requiring them to take a block of days off immediately following the death.
- **Anticipatory usage:** Ability to use days before a loved one's death for the terminally ill.
- **Allow for Flexibility:** In unique circumstances, a bereaved student should petition for extended grief absence through the division that is managing the policy (e.g., Dean of Students, Academic Affairs, etc.).



Coalition Building



The implementation of a comprehensive student bereavement policy is a crucial step in creating a compassionate and supportive academic environment. By fostering collaboration among administrators, faculty, student leaders, and campus well-being professionals, institutions can develop robust, holistic support systems for grieving students.

POTENTIAL CAMPUS PARTNERS

To build coalitions, student bereavement advocates can take the following approaches with various campus divisions, departments, offices, and organizations:

Student Affairs & Dean of Students Office

- Collaborate to develop and implement student-specific bereavement leave policies
- Work together to create a comprehensive toolkit for supporting grieving students
- Partner on awareness campaigns about the impact of grief on students' academic success¹³

Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Integrate bereavement support (e.g., grief and loss support groups) into existing diversity and inclusion initiatives¹⁴
- Collaborate on training programs that address grief from diverse cultural perspectives
- Advocate for bereavement policies that consider the needs of students from various backgrounds

Provost Office

- Engage key faculty leaders and administrators to support bereavement policies
- Collaborate on academic accommodations for grieving students^{15, 16}
- Work together to implement faculty training on supporting bereaved students^{17, 18, 19}

Human Resources Department

- Use existing faculty and staff bereavement policies as models for student policies
- Collaborate on creating a unified approach to bereavement support across the institution

Counseling Education Department

- Partner to develop grief support training programs for campus staff and faculty^{20, 21}
- Collaborate on research projects related to college student bereavement^{22, 23, 24}

Student Counseling Center

- Establish referral systems for grieving students who need additional support^{25, 26, 27}
- Collaborate on developing peer-led support groups for bereaved students^{28, 28, 30}

Student Government and Graduate Student Government

Organizations

- Involve student leaders in advocating for bereavement policies
- Collaborate on surveys to assess campus-specific bereavement needs
- Work together to raise awareness about the impact of grief on students

Student Organizations with Related Missions

- Partner with existing student organizations whose missions are peripherally related to student bereavement or grief and loss in general (e.g., neuroscience clubs, pre-med clubs, counseling student honor societies, service organizations, Panhellenic societies, or student organizations raising awareness on death-related issues such as drunk driving, suicide, and substance abuse/overdose).
- Collaborate on events and initiatives to de-stigmatize grief and promote support³¹
- Create a network of student advocates for bereavement support across campus

By building these coalitions, advocates can create a comprehensive, campus-wide approach to supporting bereaved college students, ensuring that their needs are addressed across all aspects of student life.

Getting Started

Not sure where to begin? Below are some important questions to consider when getting started:



- **How do your institutional values align with a student bereavement leave policy?**
 - Institutions must appraise their organizational climate and whether policies, such as those related to student-specific bereavement, are consistent with the institution's strategic goals, mission, vision, and values.
- **Current policies:** What do existing faculty and staff bereavement policies look like (if any)?
- Are there other **existing attendance policies** governing our campus?
 - What is the institution's history with or opinion on attendance policies?
- What **division** should the policy be housed under/who will "own" the policy? (e.g., *academic affairs, student affairs, etc.*)
- How will the policy be **enforced**?
 - Who will be the adjudicating body?
- What type of **campus** is it? (e.g., *commuter, residential*)
- What **student populations** does the campus primarily serve? (e.g., *PWI, HBCU, HSI, AANAPISI, first-generation student-serving institutions, institutions with a high percentage of underrepresented minority students, etc.*)
- How many **international students** are on campus?
- What **bereavement events** apply? (e.g., *pre-grieving a terminal illness, student miscarriage*)
- Will there be an option for **tuition recovery or funding assistance**?
- Is there a history of or ongoing concern with **student-related death incidents**? (e.g., *homicide, gun violence, suicide*)
- Is there a history of **campus tragedy**? (e.g., *gun violence, mass shooting*)
 - Did death occur on campus?
 - What was the institution's response?
- What degrees of **relationship** are considered acceptable for leave?
- Whose death **qualifies** for bereavement leave? (e.g., *nuclear family, extended family, cultural considerations for blended families, and fictive kinship*)

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our responses should be, too.**

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