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# When students die

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Four students died this semester, three in a 15-day period. Somewhere between balancing private grief and public concern, the campus community is left wondering: How many students die, and what causes their deaths? IU doesn't always have the answers.

Donna MacLafferty was falling asleep when the phone rang at 11 p.m. It was her ex-husband, asking about their son.

"Have you heard from Brian?"

Brian was an IU senior majoring in neuroscience. It was September, only the third week of fall classes, and Donna hadn't talked to him that day.

Neither had Brian's girlfriend, who had been frantically trying to contact him. He hadn't returned her calls or texts. Now, as midnight approached, Brian's girlfriend was outside his apartment, banging on the door. No answer. The windows were dark, and his car was parked nearby. Brian's dad was calling 911.

At her home outside Indianapolis, Donna tried not to think of the worst. But as the minutes ticked by, she knew something was wrong.

After what felt like an eternity, the phone rang again. This time it was a police officer.

"I'm sorry," Donna recalls him telling her, "but Brian committed suicide."

Brian's mother knelt on the floor and laid her head on her bed. She was in so much shock that she didn't know how to feel.

"It's just this ... Oh my gosh," she said. "Oh my gosh, he is dead. He is never coming back."

What made the loss all the more alarming in Bloomington was that Brian's death was the third death of an IU student in just 15 days.

On campus, rumors spread. Bits of official information came sporadically, if at all. The Monroe County coroner wouldn't promptly release causes of death. IU, meanwhile, was reluctant to make all three deaths public. The University acknowledged one of the deaths, which had occurred on campus, immediately.

Striving to respect the privacy of the families, IU did not confirm the other two student deaths until days afterwards, when pressed by the Indiana Daily Student.

The lack of solid information raised deeper questions. How often do IU students die? How do those

numbers compare to mortality rates at other universities? When a student dies, how does the University decide what to say publicly? Does anyone track these deaths and their causes? If not, how does the University know when there is a problem?

Over the past three months, the IDS has sought answers from public records and in interviews with IU officials, the Monroe County coroner and families of deceased students. After a recent unanimous ruling from the Indiana Supreme Court declared death certificates public record, the IDS also gathered those records from Monroe County and Marion County health departments.

Compiling a complete inventory of student deaths is difficult because key information that would enable access to these documents are missing from IU's records.

The University has no protocol for tracking the causes of student deaths and responds on a case-by-case basis with no written procedure. In fact, IU does not know how many of its students have died.

The Dean of Students Office has recorded 156 deaths of IU-Bloomington students since 2000. But in its efforts to put together an exhaustive list from that same time period, the IDS has discovered at least 163 student deaths. The most recent, a freshman who died in his hometown, was a week before Thanksgiving.

IU's numbers are slightly higher than known national college mortality rates. Dr. James Turner, a University of Virginia professor who headed the only study of college student deaths in the last 70 years, said that the national average for a student population the size of IU's is 8.4 deaths a year. Based on the numbers since 2000, an average of 10.8 students die a year at IU.

About 40 percent of those student deaths occurred on or near the Bloomington campus. The most common causes, based on death certificates from Monroe and Marion counties, were accidents — including car crashes, fires, unintended

overdoses and falls from balconies or buildings.

The numbers are higher than many at IU would guess. For men and women at the peak of young adulthood, death seems far away.

"I don't think they are aware at all," Turner said. "In fact, I don't think college presidents or faculty members or the press understand the facts."

This lack of awareness, he said, is a national problem. His study found that some universities keep close track of student deaths, while others take a laissez-faire approach. The result is that too little is known about how students die.

"It's important," Turner said, "to have accurate data about the death of college students to determine whether or not you are doing everything you can to keep them healthy and safe."

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The series of deaths caught Bloomington off guard.

Sophomore Danielle Lynn on Aug. 26. Junior Kelly Hackendahl on Aug. 28. Senior Brian MacLafferty on Sept. 10.

"What happened at the beginning of the semester, it shook everybody," said Mark Land, associate vice president of Public Affairs and Government Relations for IU. "It shook us all. Having three students die so close together has made us think through: are we doing right by everybody? If we're not at least examining our process and procedures when something like that happens, we're not doing our job."

Monroe County Coroner Nicole Meyer ruled all three deaths as suicides.

Even though the details in such cases are personal and painful for the families, knowing how people die is a matter of public interest. In the Indiana Supreme Court's ruling on death certificates as public record, the justices weighed the privacy of individuals with the need for transparency.

"Death is an intimate and per-

**Eric and Marilyn Behrman's daughter, Jill Behrman, died in May 2000.**

"Every day you put a foot in front of the other and keep going on. Things change. Life changes. There are sad times, but there are still good times. You need to concentrate on those things, keep moving forward. That's what she would want."

Eric Behrman

"You're certainly not prepared to be the parent of a missing child or a murdered child. That's something you have to learn as you go."

Marilyn Behrman

**Kenneth Mack's son, Jimmy Mack, died Oct. 27, 2007.**

"Live life. Have fun. Don't take everything so serious. If there's trouble get away from it. Life's too short—I know that. For a fact."

**Dave Specyal's son, Jason Specyal, died Nov. 29, 2007.**

"Freshmen should have a required class: dealing with depression. How to manage your life and how to look out for each other."

**Victoria Hays' daughter, Jessica Ruiz, died July 4, 2008.**

"I was kind of disappointed that I didn't get a letter or anything from the president saying 'I'm sorry for your loss.' It made me feel like if I hadn't contacted them it wouldn't have made any difference, they wouldn't have even noticed that she was gone."

**Mary Land's son, Michael Land, died Feb. 16, 2010.**

"I bet I got five or six different phone calls from the University asking if there was anything at all they could do. I was shocked by the amount of support."

**Carla Putnam's son, Michael Leudeman, died April 21, 2011.**

"I aged 10 years physically. I certainly don't have the daily joy. I have joy, but it comes harder and less frequent."

**Connie Orhn's daughter, Renee Orhn, died Oct. 1, 2011.**

"I didn't want to become a bitter, mean, rude human being. I didn't want to go that way. I couldn't have done that alone. I don't believe I could have. I got help from people, but God helped me the most on that one."

**Bill MacLafferty's son, Brian MacLafferty, died Sept. 10, 2014.**

"We just have to accept this reality that I'm not going to see my son again in this life, and I just pray that I see him in the next life."